

Can Christianity be Reduced to Morality?
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As one of the world's great religions, Christianity has been one of the supreme transformative movements in history, profoundly impacting not only the personal and spiritual lives of its believers but also forever altering the social, political, intellectual and cultural fabrics of the western world. There is seemingly no facet of western society that has not been touched by this remarkable movement. In light of this impact, it might appear shocking that anyone might contend that Christianity can be reduced in its essential meaning to a single one of the many functions it has played in western society, namely, the morality it has cultivated as embodied in the teachings and person of Jesus himself. Yet not only might one argue that Christianity *can* be reduced to morality, but there may good reasons for thinking that it *should* be reduced to morality. The following paper will explore the question of whether Christianity can be reduced to morality by considering Immanuel Kant's analysis of Christianity in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, which seems to provide an extended attempt at just such a reduction. The first section of the paper will briefly clarify how the notion of "reducing" Christianity to morality should be understood philosophically. The second section will examine the role of Christianity and religion in Kant's philosophy to determine whether his analysis meets the description of a "reduction" of Christianity to morality presented in the first section. The final section will raise some points and questions about what I take to be the more important question, which is not whether Christianity can be reduced to morality, but whether it should be so reduced. In other words, the last section will reverse Kant's

formula and ask whether *can implies ought* with respect to the question of reducing Christianity to morality.

I. Clarification of What it Means Philosophically to Reduce Christianity to Morality

As with most philosophical issues, it is best for the purpose of avoiding unnecessary confusion and disputes to frame the central issue with a more careful description of its fundamental concepts. Perhaps the most crucial concept to the present discussion, and the one most in need of clarification, is what it means to "reduce" Christianity to morality. The concept of "reduction" certainly has different meanings in different contexts, but for our present purpose the notion that Christianity can be reduced to morality means that Christianity's truth and meaning is exhausted by the moral truths contained within it. In other words, a reduction of Christianity to morality implies that any seemingly non-moral concepts in Christianity find their real meaning and truth, if they have any meaning and truth at all, in Christian morality. In light of the profound moral teachings of Christ, and the rich foundation for human society conveyed by the dictates to love one's neighbor and to do unto others as you would have done unto you, the reduction of Christianity to morality might at first appear to preserve its fundamental meaning without sacrificing anything of great significance. However, minimal reflection reveals that such a reduction seems to dismiss the truth and value of spiritual concepts like Christ's incarnation, the Trinity, and revealed truths in general whose main message arguably transcends ordinary moral notions of duties and rights and concerns our understanding of, and our relation to, God.

In order to clarify more precisely what is at issue in the present discussion, it is also important to distinguish the strong claim that Christianity can be *reduced* to morality from the considerably weaker claim that Christianity is *essentially* a moral religion. The notion that Christianity can be reduced to morality implies that understanding Christian morality is not only necessary for understanding Christianity itself, but it is also sufficient for understanding it. In other words, it means both that one must understand Christianity's inherent morality in order to understand Christianity itself, and that attaining this understanding *guarantees* that one has understood the real meaning of Christianity. In contrast, the claim that Christianity is essentially a moral religion implies that understanding Christian morality is necessary but not sufficient for understanding Christianity itself, i.e. it allows room for the possibility that Christianity can have a meaning beyond the meaning found in its moral teachings.

In light of these distinctions, one might wonder whether any of the great philosophical masters of the western tradition have defended the view that Christianity is reducible to morality. Perhaps it will not be surprising to discover, given the importance he places on morality within his philosophical system, that Immanuel Kant can be interpreted in his moral philosophy, particularly in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, as reducing Christianity, and, indeed all three Abrahamic religions (i.e. also Judaism and Islam), as reducible to morality. How and to what extent Kant does this will be the focus of the following section.

II. *Kant's Emphasis in Religion on the Moral Character of Christianity*

As a background to the following discussion, it is important to bear in mind Kant's view of the relation between the nature and limits of human cognition, on the one hand, and concepts such as God, soul, immortality, and freedom, which are essential features of most religious worldviews, on the other hand. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that human knowledge of objects requires contributions from two distinct faculties: 1) sensibility, which provides the matter or content of our knowledge of objects, and 2) understanding, which synthesizes or combines that content into the thought of an object. In other words, human cognition requires not only input received from the senses, but also that this input is *thought as* something. In addition, Kant claims that what enables sensibility to receive sensory input is that it has its own structures, space and time, which Kant calls forms or a priori conditions, and that what enables the understanding to think of that sensory input as an object is that it has a priori concepts (which he calls categories). Thus, if Kant is correct about all of this, then there are at least two conclusions to be drawn: 1) the human mind can only know objects through conditions that it imposes on its experience of them; and 2) human beings cannot know any objects that are not given through sensibility, the understanding, and the a priori conditions of both.

The preceding outlook is crucial for considering Kant's view concerning whether it is possible for human beings to have knowledge of God, soul, immortality, and freedom. For if Kant is correct in his analysis, then it is impossible for human beings to have knowledge of any of these objects since none of them are objects that are given in space and time and to sensibility. Nevertheless, despite rejecting the claim that we can have

knowledge about God, freedom, and immortality Kant does not conclude that these concepts should be dismissed as meaningless. Rather, he claims that even though we cannot have theoretical *knowledge* of these objects it is possible for us to *think* of them as real objects that lie outside the limits of our sensibility and knowledge. In other words, Kant claims that theoretical reason is limited to knowledge of objects given in sensibility and through the a priori conditions of human cognition, and this creates a logical space for *believing* in God, freedom, and immortality as realities existing outside our knowledge, or experience. Thus, if there are non-theoretical reasons for us to believe in these objects, then believing in them will at least be consistent with the principles of theoretical reason.

It is in his practical philosophy that Kant locates pure, a priori reasons for believing in the existence of God, freedom, and immortality. According to Kant, it is necessary from a moral point of view to postulate these beings, particularly God and immortality, in order to account for our pursuit of the summum bonum, or highest good, which Kant describes as a synthesis of virtue and happiness in which happiness is conceived as the result of virtue. Now obviously experience provides no guarantee that being morally virtuous will result in happiness, so Kant's view is that the pursuit of the highest good requires postulating the existence of God as the being who can coordinate our natural desire for happiness with the distinct and more worthy pursuit of moral virtue. The claim is not that the idea of the highest good gives us knowledge of God's existence as the being who can make the highest good attainable. Rather, the claim is merely that we have a practical reason for assuming that God exists to give coherence to our pursuit of the highest good, but we do not thereby have theoretical knowledge of God's existence.

The foregoing discussion provides the background of Kant's examination of religion in his work *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, which expounds the possibility of a religion based in pure reason and its relation to actual, historical faiths, particularly Christianity. A natural starting point for a brief exposition of aspects of *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* is the contrast Kant draws between the one, true religion and historical (ecclesiastical) faiths. According to Kant, "*Pure religious faith* alone can found a universal church; for only [such] rational faith can be believed in and shared by everyone..." (Religion, p. 94) In order for this pure religious faith, which Kant identifies as the one, true religion, to be believed in and shared by everyone it must be based on purely moral laws because "each individual can know of (these laws) himself through his own reason..." (Religion, p. 95) In other words, the one, true religion must be based on something accessible to all human beings regardless of their historical, cultural, social, etc. circumstances. Kant's view is that moral laws are accessible to all human beings since they are based upon the categorical imperative as the fundamental a priori principle of practical reason. Thus, by following the moral law and satisfying our moral duties we become "well-pleasing" to God since, "by fulfilling [our] duties to [human beings] (ourselves and others) [we] are...performing God's commands...and it is absolutely impossible to serve God more directly in any other way..." (Religion, p. 94)

Kant distinguishes the one, true religion of morality from historical faiths such as the Abrahamic religions. Kant describes an historical faith as one that is "grounded solely on facts, can extend its influence no further than the tidings of it can reach, subject to circumstances of time and place and dependent upon the capacity (of men) to judge the credibility of such tidings." (Religion, p. 94) On Kant's view, historical faiths like

Christianity, grounded as they are on sacred texts such as the New Testament, are discoverable only to the extent that these texts themselves are disseminated and then judged credible by human beings; and because historical faiths are based on the historical events described in sacred texts they are not accessible to every human being, as is the moral law, and this prevents any historical faith from being regarded as the one (i.e. universal), true religion. But despite the impossibility of regarding any historical faith as the true religion, Kant maintains that it is through historical faith that humanity can begin to work towards, or approximate, an "ethical commonwealth", which is the never completely realizable ideal of a union of people governing themselves according to the moral law. (An ethical commonwealth is never completely realizable because of the ineradicable human tendency to be influenced by natural desires in our actions rather than being governed by the moral law alone). Historical faith advances God's ideal of an ethical commonwealth because it provides the origin of churches, which represent humanity's attempts to achieve an ethical commonwealth in the world.

However, despite the importance Kant affords to churches in attempting to realize an ethical commonwealth, it is crucial to understand his beliefs both that 1) the *statutory* laws of churches, which are derived by revelation from sacred texts and prescribe certain actions and observances to its members, do not supersede the *moral* law and cannot be substituted for it in making us well-pleasing to God; and 2) "every church erected upon statutory laws can be the true church only so far as it contains within itself a principle of steadily approximating to pure rational faith...and of becoming able, in time, to dispense with the churchly faith (that in it which is historical)..." (Religion, p. 140) In other words, Kant believes that historical faith has a purely instrumental value for a church's

realization of an ethical commonwealth, and thus the church's historical faith can be discarded as it more fully realizes that ideal. The church itself may remain a necessary condition for the propagation of the true religion, but its statutory laws and historical faith seem to Kant to be dispensable.

In light of the foregoing remarks, Kant regards Christianity as a natural religion, i.e. a religion that combines morality with both the idea of God, who can actualize morality's ends, and the concept of immortality, which is necessary for an individual to be able to progress continually towards a will governed exclusively by the moral law. (Religion, p. 145) In other words, Kant views Christianity as a universal religion because it propagates a morality that is knowable by everyone since it is grounded in the ideas of pure, a priori practical reason. But even though Christianity is grounded in principles present in all human reason it still requires the church, which, of course, was founded by Jesus, to secure and promote the unanimity of its principles. Thus, the Christian church propagates morality through the historical faith whose foundation is the Scriptures that describe the teachings and life of Jesus as a moral exemplar. Accordingly, it is not surprising to discover that the teachings of Jesus in the Scriptures are given a moral interpretation by Kant.

Yet conspicuously absent from the foregoing discussion are the more traditional spiritual concepts associated with Christianity such as the means for securing personal salvation, and the role Kant affords to modes of worship such as prayer and church attendance. Considering each of these in turn, Kant perhaps predictably maintains that salvation is achieved by the intention behind our actions, which must be cultivated over the course of a lifetime, to fulfill our moral duties, and that there is no other service to

God, such as fulfilling the requirements prescribed by the statutory laws of an historical faith, that can substitute in God's judgment for the achievement of a morally good will. In addition, Kant contends that salvation cannot be achieved by declaring one's complete conviction for the truth of the dogmas of faith since his epistemological framework makes it impossible to have theoretical knowledge of the articles of faith, and thus any such declaration would be false and would be known by God to be false since His omniscience allows Him to know what is in our individual hearts and minds. Thus, Kant asks, "Do you really trust yourself to assert the truth of these dogmas in the sight of Him who knows the heart and at the risk of losing all that is valuable and holy to you?" (Religion, p. 177) Indeed, Kant goes on to declare that, "The very man who has the temerity to say: He who does not believe in this or that historical doctrine as a sacred truth, that man *is damned*, ought to be able to say also: If what I am now telling you is not true, *let me be damned!*" (Religion, p. 178n.) Our salvation cannot be dependent upon asserting conviction in the doctrines of an historical faith since we cannot truthfully claim to have knowledge of the truth of such doctrines, and thus to declare such knowledge compromises the good will whose possession alone would make us genuinely well-pleasing to God.

Turning very briefly to Kant's treatment of spiritual practices such as prayer, church attendance, baptism, and communion, he predictably interprets these practices as having their real significance in assisting us towards our moral ends. Thus, the real significance of prayer is that it gives voice to a sincere wish to be pleasing to God in our actions by acting with a good will, but the mere act of prayer does not by itself secure God's grace in the absence of making every effort to act with a good will. Church attendance is a

manifestation of one's belonging to a community that has a moral obligation as a group to strive to achieve the divine state of an ethical commonwealth, but once again the practice of church attendance should not by itself be understood as a means to God's grace. Baptism is an initiation into a "church community" and signifies a commitment to a faith that fosters moral ends or to the education in such a faith if a child is being baptized. Finally, the taking of communion is a practice that reminds us of our belonging and participation in a moral community. (Religion, p. 187)

In light of this summary of Kant's views on Christianity, religion, and morality is he best interpreted as reducing Christianity to morality or merely regarding morality as essential to Christianity? It will be recalled from the earlier discussion that to reduce Christianity to morality implies that the meaning of Christianity is exhausted by its moral truths, and thus that understanding its moral truths is both necessary and sufficient for understanding Christianity itself. Accordingly, since Kant consistently interprets basic Christian concepts in moral terms it seems plausible to conclude that his treatment of Christianity does largely reduce it to morality. Although Kant does not make the following observation expressly, what seems to differentiate Christianity from the other Abrahamic faiths, in his estimation, is not its moral system, which is common to all three, but rather it is that Christianity more purely expresses that moral system without admixture of statutory laws. Thus, the Jesus of the New Testament is the greatest moral exemplar and the moral lessons of his teachings are more easily distilled from the New Testament than these lessons can be distilled from other sacred texts. Yet even if we are willing to grant to Kant that Christianity is the paradigmatically moral Abrahamic religion is it proper to follow him in interpreting it almost exclusively in moral terms?

IV. *Should Christianity Be Reduced to Morality?*

Before opening this topic to discussion, it will be worthwhile to consider some of the advantages and disadvantages of any attempt to reduce Christianity to morality. One advantage of reducing Christianity to its central moral teachings is that it would focus the faithful away from disputes over irresolvable ecclesiastical issues between the sects and would direct them towards achieving the ideal of attaining perfectly moral wills as individuals. Since a good will would be manifest in good works, working towards a perfectly good will would advance social harmony and facilitate progress towards the ideal of a genuinely moral community, and it would decrease societal tensions and factions along sectarian lines within the Christian world. Similarly, the reduction of Christianity and all the Abrahamic religions to a mutually recognized moral system would foster patience, understanding, and tolerance between the peoples of these faiths during an historical period in which the global tensions between them is particularly pronounced.

Yet some would object that the above advantages of reducing Christianity to morality are purchased at a price to faith that exceeds the value of these advantages themselves. For example, it might be argued that Kant's treatment of Christianity fails to capture the most essential aspect of the Christian faith, namely, the meaning of the human incarnation of God in the person of Jesus. One might contend that the act of divine love for humanity contained in the incarnation, life, and sacrifice of Jesus cannot be described in merely moral terms; for God cannot be regarded as morally obligated to make this sacrifice. Certainly many faithful Christians will regard God's willingness to sacrifice

Jesus on our behalf as the ultimate gift to humanity, a gift which is given despite our being morally undeserving of it. Indeed, from a strictly moral point of view, justice would seem to require that retribution for misdeeds, sins, or immoral acts should be paid by the transgressor alone. What allows Jesus to atone for our sins is God's transcendent love for humanity. Nietzsche's famous aphorism (to cite an unexpected source at this juncture) that what is done out of love is done beyond good and evil seems to capture the sense that there are dimensions of human life the meaning of which might transcend morality. From this point of view, any account of Christianity that does not make God's love for humanity central to its concept of faith will be inadequate for capturing its most profound meaning and truth. (It should be noted here, even though there is not space to discuss it, that Kant does provide a discussion, in moral terms, of Jesus' atonement for our sins as a mystery of faith.)

In a similar vein, Kierkegaard might regard Kant's restriction of the meaning of Christianity to morality as limiting it to the cold, sterile, objective domain of rational concepts which are accessible and applicable to everyone. Kierkegaard would argue that the universal character of moral duties implies that they cannot be the basis of a unique, personal relationship between the individual and God. Instead of attempting to establish a personal relationship with God in this objective manner, such a relationship must be based on dimensions of human existence which are distinctive to the individual rather than universally shared. Accordingly, genuine faith is given through feelings, passions, and, in short, the affective dimensions of human existence that both distinguish us as individuals and allow us to form bonds of love and friendship. It is not by directing our reason to God understood as a specific object of knowledge that we establish a personal

relationship with Him, but rather we must open our hearts and commit them to God in order to feel His presence in our lives and to establish a personal relationship with Him, not as an object, but as a fellow subject. One can argue that it is this subjective dimension of faith that is lacking in Kant's treatment of Christianity, and that the subjectivity of faith prevents Christianity from being reduced to morality.