

IS RELIGION A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPEASE? A KANTIAN READING

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Abstract—Religious claims and ideas have never been the forte of Immanuel Kant. And there is no doubt that his works on philosophy of religion has been overshadowed by his mammoth Critical discourses. At the same time this does not necessarily conclude that he was never concerned of the religious claims or inclinations. Even though the three Critiques does not really resonate with an affirmation of serious religious inclinations, he did not deny the imminent role of religious concepts and its significance in his philosophy and, in general, mankind. It is an interesting fact to note that Kant in his second edition of the first Critique, made a conspicuous statement, “I have denied knowledge in order to make room for faith”. There are perhaps contentions as to the implication of this statement. But even though one may observe certain ambiguities in the statement, it also gave the needed toe-hold for the persistence of religious concepts in his philosophical discourses. What came later as Kant’s matured work on religion entitled, ‘Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason’ (henceforth, Religion) was then no surprise for Kantians who are inclined to his religious insights.

In this paper, attempts will be made to consider how Kant was able to reconcile the apparently perennial debate on the conflicts between faith and reason. What seems to be an illusion, an inappropriate application of the theoretical ideas of the pure reason to an alleged object somehow finds its way back into the bosom of practical reason by affirming the religious inclinations through the moral discourse. From this perspective I will be arguing that religion is not an illusion and definitely not a psychological appease in Kant’s philosophical discourses. Rather it is an outward manifestation of the moral inclinations; the Categorical Imperative. To substantiate my move I will be mainly relying on the affinity between his moral discourse and religion, primarily from the perspectives of Religion; that, “morality inevitably leads to religion” coupled with the impact of the theory of ‘radical evil nature of mankind’.

Keywords: pure reason, radical evil nature, categorical imperative, morality.

I. INTRODUCTION

More than two centuries have passed yet the influence of Immanuel Kant in the philosophical arena, whose significant contributions in the aforementioned still exuberates with the same vivacity as it did back then. There is no doubt as to the paramount significance of his critical philosophy compared to his lesser works such as political philosophy and religion, until recently. Perhaps, there are contentions as to the reason for such implications. Whatever the cases may be, such contention shall be kept for another time except some areas that are needed in substantiating the arguments of this article.

II. KANT’S RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

Religion has been considered and defined by varied scholars and religious adherents from their own perspectives and it is indeed a challenge to come up with a single universal definition for religion. So, to save myself the trouble of all these many plausible definitions and perspectives of religion I would like to narrow it down to the institutionalized religion. In other words, Kant’s religious background and the religion

as it was then. Kant was born and brought up in a middle class Pietist family, a conspicuous Protestant sect then. He was sent to an institution at the age of eight and taught under the watchful eyes of the religious teachers. He was believed to have groaned under the strict moral and religious disciplined during his younger days (Scruton, 2001). Bernard G. M. Reardon also in a way affirmed the seed of moral consciousness being rooted in Kant’s early religious background though abhorred the later for the rest of his life (Reardon, 1988). Perhaps, the greatest influence of religiosity if at all can be credited to his mother who died when he was but a little boy. Her love and teachings on morality did leave her mark deep in his heart (Pluhar, 2009). This perhaps coupled with the rigorous early students’ life catapulted him to be such a great ethicist in his later life. Religion to him was a hand-in-glove with moral inclinations. They are complementary if not a synonyms. But the traditional religious practices as Kantian biographers such as Ernst Cassirer pointed out he had an outright aversion for religious rituals. Perhaps, there were instances where Kant literally ran away from ritualistic gatherings, such as college prayer meetings. Nevertheless, religion as he avers is more than ritualistic practices because of the moral consciousness. Religion then, is the other side of the same coin of the morally inclined rational life.

III. RELIGION INCLINATIONS IN THE CRITIQUES

Having had the needed glimpse into his plausible influences, background and the projected definition, let us now move on to the central concerns of the article. Perhaps, certain ground clearance of the concepts are desirable. For instance, the idea of a ‘psychological appease’ must not be read as in sociological or psychological perspective of religion per se. In this article it is used as in illusion, in-lined with the misappropriation of the theoretical ideas of the pure reason to an alleged object. This is because according to Kant only the *categories* are applied not the theoretical ideas. With this at the back of his mind, one of the core concern of Kant in the first *Critique* was to come up with the ground for his epistemological stand by critiquing the reason. In other words, demarcating the limits of pure reason. The pertinent question was, ‘whether synthetic *a priori* proposition or judgment was possible’ (Smith, 1984). Kant noticed the impossibility of the traditional metaphysics in his assertion for the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgments. Consequently, Kant’s attempt to come up with a new kind of metaphysics under scientific metaphysics, the general metaphysical concerns such as theological inclinations under the speculative theology could no longer make it to the front seat. But whether it is for a respite to the religious Kantian scholars or Kant’s sincere desire, he found himself affirming the non-arbitrary character of these theoretical ideas which in a way still spells the general metaphysical concepts (Smith, 1965). These theoretical ideas

in other words are ideas of the pure reason. They only have the speculative functions unlike the categories. The upside of this truth for instance lies in the significance of these ideas in our scientific enquiries and moral discourse though only speculative in nature at this juncture. The downside on the other hand leads one to a serious mistake when one applies these ideas to an alleged object. The degree of this mistake to Kant is no less than the Biblical idea of *sin*. For this reason, it is imperative to note that, to Kant, the application of these theoretical ideas in the manner of the categories is a serious offence. This is because it leads one to illusion. This made Kant to affirm the other primary tasks of the *Critique of the Pure Reason* i.e. setting limits to the theoretical ideas. When concept such as God are employed and applied to an alleged object as in religious parameters, it is still an illusion. This then points us to the illusive perspective of religion under the regulative function due to the misappropriation of such ideas. Considering this scenario, religion for Kant in the light of the first *Critique* was more of a psychological appease. A cognizant acceptance of the illusive nature of religion simply to appease one's religious inclinations because of the religious concepts such as God, the 'ideal of reason' which is deeply rooted in the spirit of mankind (Smith, 1984). To be more precise, the religious concept such as God which is central to his religious background in a way failed to have a rational claim, in stricter sense, an objective knowledge. For the simple reason, the term 'existence' is not a predicate. So, the statement 'God exist' simply does not follow in his objective knowledge claim for this theoretical idea. This was in short his argument against St. Anselm's famous Ontological argument for the existence of God. Though negative in approach, Kantians who adhered to his religious inclinations perhaps are comforted with the assertion that the idea of the Supreme Being or God, an ideal of the reason though failed to give objective reality can neither be disproved speculatively (Smith, 1965). If one is to read the application of the theoretical ideas of the pure reason from the perspective of a psychological inclinations, perhaps Kant is right in affirming the illusive nature of religion. On the other hand, subscribing to such readings can render the religion of his time (Protestant Christianity), to a serious issues of credibility. Fortunately, it does not end there, he further affirms that these ideas of the pure reason has its locus in the reason itself. For this fact, how illusive and tempted one may be to apply and lead to illusion cannot simply be brushed aside. In other words, these speculative functions are indeed unquestionably significant. So, in the light of his quest for the objective knowledge through the application of the categories Kant apparently leave out the questions or assertions on the matters of faith to the doctrinal realm of *faith*. No question as to the ambiguity of religious concepts in the first *Critique*, primarily due to his epistemic assertion. Nevertheless, how illusive the theoretical ideas are by the virtue of it been the perfect 'ideal of reason', it plays the undeniable role in the affirmation of phenomenal facts of the scientific and moral assertions. Stephan Korner did affirm the significance of the ideal of reason as an 'excellent and unavoidable *necessary* regulative use' (Stephan Korner, 1990). On a lighter note, the noumena realm acted as a breather as it played the perfect pitch in elevating theoretical ideas pertaining to religion and religious concepts as John Hick asserted following Kant's perspective on the nature of the noumena.

The further positive twist to this tale comes to a greater light when Kant in his second edition of first *Critique*, made an affirmative statement in the preface to the book, that 'I have denied knowledge in order to make room for faith' (Smith, 1965). This is a rather fascinating statement from a person who seems to have given the most destructive contention against the ontological argument for the existence of God. As to the reason and the intended implications of the statement is highly contentious. A religious and politically inclined reading would suggest that the most obvious reason is the plausible politico-religious constrain scenario back then. No doubt there are instances to support such move because he was in fact ordered not to engage on any religious writings or pertaining to doctrines of the Church. I would like to content that if this was the sole case, Kant would have not even bothered to complete his discourse on philosophy of religion in his later days. Kant in the first *Critique* failed to consider the plausible grounding of metaphysics on a firm foundation which includes rational theological stand. This difficulty of rational theological grounding in the first *Critique* has also been acknowledged by Chris Firestone and Nathan Jacobs in their book, 'In Defense of Kant's Religion' (Firestone, 2008). The first *Critique* from the optimistic lens did portray Kant as one chastising the Church to give a more rational grounding to its doctrinal beliefs. And no doubt as we have observed, religious concepts failed to merit in the grounding of the synthetic *a priori* judgments or the scientific metaphysics in the first *Critique*. Nevertheless, Kant gave the needed toe-hold for further improvements in his quest for plausible rational grounds of religious inclinations in the second *Critique*. The statement in the *Preface* to second edition of the first *Critique* is more than just a passing remarks to appease the religious leaders or clergies of his time. Kant was well read and well informed on the Christian doctrines and even taught theology prior to his philosophical lectureship at the Konigsberg's University (Pluhar, 2009). He was a well versed Christian scholar with regard to his faith—Christianity and Protestant Pietism in particular. But he did affirm that the teaching of the doctrinal faith must be left to the (privilege few) theologians or the clergies *per se*. So, the statement is not to simply comply with the traditions of the context then, rather affirmed the significance of such inclinations beyond the epistemic claims—realm of faith. He was no doubt fascinated by the religious text and equally critical at times. This fascinations of Kant goes beyond the ritualistic practices and affirms the pragmatic rational moral religion. This in a way is a great cue to his perspectives on religion.

IV. THE MORALITY AND RELIGION AFFINITY

The first *Critique* though made room for faith, still failed to give a more concrete stamp to it. The theoretical ideas did not have what it takes to be a rational claim within the pure reason. In the second *Critique*, Kant was rather less ambiguous in affirming the practical ideas which has a direct implications with his moral autonomy—the Categorical Imperatives. This moral autonomy is one that affirms the rationale morality. The freewill is then the outward manifestation of this fact. It is imperative to be cleared that a rational being according to Kant is one 'who has the capacity to act according to the representation of laws; according to principles, or a *will*' (Gregor, 2011). In this moral rationality Kant injected the religious inclinations in the light of the plausible moral

conflict as he affirms the dark-side of human nature—the radical evil. This radical evil nature is not some ontological or mystical being with diabolical intentions to harm mankind. Rather it is radical in the sense it is the nemesis of moral rationality because ‘it corrupts the grounds of all moral maxims’ (Wood and Giovanni, 1998). And it is rooted in the very ground of moral autonomy. The reality of this nature is neither portrayed nor implied in the second *Critique*. So, it came as a shock to Kantian adherents when he affirmed the pertinent affinity between morality and religion. Karl Barth for instances did not really expect such theory from Kant. He further affirms Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s reaction which came heavily on Kant even to the point that Kant end up kissing the fringe of the clothes of doctrines which he vehemently fought in his critical philosophies (Barth, 1972). Apparently, the direct relation of this nature is asserted when he explicitly pointed out that ‘morality inevitably leads to religion’ (Wood, 1998). This affinity is the key to understanding his philosophy of religion from a rational point of view. In other words, religion to Kant ought to be a manifestation of moral inclinations. Religion is but a moral religion and a morally inclined rational individual is equally religious. According to him a religion that fails to manifest this moral inclination perhaps fall short of the core entity of religion *per se*. For this very reason Kant was contentious of the institutionalized religion of his time because moral inclination is somewhat lacking in the very functions of such institutionalized religion, especially among the clergies. His primary concern though lies with the conundrums of the radical evil nature of mankind, he avers that within the ethical community of morally inclined rational beings one would be able overcome such nature, eventually. At the same time Kant is optimistic of the *means of grace* as the final touch to one’s moral perfection not to work for it but simply by doing what ought to be done and leaving the rest to God. There is a plausible contention as to whether morality is and should be a by-product of religion or vice versa. To a religious individual, morality is nothing more than the product of one’s religious inclinations. But to Kant it is the moral consciousness within us that affirms the religious concepts such as God as a rational claim. And more importantly, rational grounding of religious inclinations is only possible through moral consciousness. So, in a strict Kantian sense ‘morality inevitably leads to religion’ may not necessarily meant to affirm its vice-versa that, ‘religion inevitably leads to morality’. Rather, it is to affirm that religious claims are not an illusion because of the moral inclination within us. But keeping in mind the revealed religion, such as Christianity’s claim of the historicity of Jesus, Kant is inclined to see it as the perfection of morality and the perfect ideal to aspire for, simply by emulating Christ. Then the question is, should religion subscribe only to revealed historical claims and leave out morality? Kant avers that if this be the case, morality is not at lost but religion. But the Christianity of his time, the Pietism is not devoid of moral consciousness rather affirms it. In this manner, the converging point of the morally inclined individual as a religious rational individual is wrapped up in the natural religion where religion is clothed by the rationality. So, if morality is but one of the many manifestations of religion, Kantian moral religion perhaps did not quite reach the top of the ladder. But Kant

being a moral philosopher at the same time a philosopher theologian did give the needed rational grounding of religion. This is because the categorical imperative or the practical idea i.e. *freedom*, is experiential. Free will or the rational autonomy is experienced as one live out the moral consciousness. The *summum bonum* in the ‘moral belief’ validates the religious concept such as God and immortality at the same level with moral sentiments (Smith, 1984). In the light of these readings, religion is not some illusions or a psychological appease to simple ease our mind or appeasing our reason. Rather, it is something that is rational and pragmatic because of our moral consciousness.

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, religion to Kant is not an opium of the people as Karl Marx maintained. It is not simply a crutch or safety net to fall into in times of emotional distress, sorrows or happiness though it levitates one in such circumstances. Religion though has the illusive character which at times seems to conflict with the concepts of the impulsive nature of the pure reason, still finds its way back in the bosom of practical reason of moral realm. The thrust is that it is a rational faith that rings with affirmation from the moral consciousness of the moral law within us. Unless morality is an illusion, religion can never be since the latter is expressed through our moral acts. This is imperative because religion is but a reflection of our moral acts. From this standpoint if morality is an illusion, so will our rationality of it. After all to Kant rational autonomy is the defining factor of our morality. Religion, through the lens of Kantian perspective is definitely not an appease to our psychological needs rather affirms who we truly are, the morally inclined religious rational beings.

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