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Review of *Kant and the Question of Theology*, edited by Chris L. Firestone, Nathan A. Jacobs and James H. Joiner

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Chris L. Firestone, Nathan A Jacobs, and James H. Joiner, eds. *Kant and the Question of Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. x+260 pp. \$99.99 (hbk).

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For over a decade Chris Firestone and Nathan Jacobs have played a significant role, both as authors and editors, in making a case for a theologically “robust” reading of Kant, in which his engagement with theological concepts and religious doctrines is treated as integrally connected with the overall trajectory of his work. It is a reading seen as applicable not only to pre-critical and critical writings focused on religion and theology but also, and more significantly, to the main lineaments of critical philosophy. The twelve essays in this volume, edited in collaboration with James Joiner, are organized under three headings—“Kant and God,” “Kant and Religion,” and “Kant and Redemption”—and move that case forward on a number of theological and philosophical fronts.

Since a short review is unable to do full justice to the range of issues in the volume, I focus first on one essay in each section that I found offering the most insightful claims and/or provocative arguments, particularly with respect to interpretive trajectories that continue to consider Kant’s theological importance (if any) to be a negative one—i.e., views in which Kant’s strictures on human knowing provide the purifying argumentative fire to which philosophy should doggedly subject theology’s conceptual feet. These discussions will be followed by a section surveying key points from the other essays, particularly ones indicating directions for further philosophical probing of the theological Kant—and/or theological probing of the philosophical Kant!

Pablo Muchnik’s essay, “The Birth of God and the Problem of History,” focuses on Kant’s treatment, in *Idea for a Universal History* and *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, of the relationship between nature and providence in the unfolding moral trajectory of human history. Muchnik proposes a correlation between, on one hand, Kant’s account of a history in which humanity is called upon to become “of age” morally and, on the other, an understanding of God congruent with such growing moral maturity. He argues that Kant presents that correlation as one in which humanity, in taking upon itself the task of maturing into autonomy, makes possible “the birth of God”—i.e., “a moment in human consciousness when the notion of an inscrutable deity is replaced by a new, thoroughly moral conception of the divine” (48). On this reading, in which Kant recognizes “the need to embrace a dynamic conception of the divine to harmonize the teleology of nature and the teleology of freedom” (51), Muchnik sees him putting forth “a daring thesis...that only an evolving conception of the divine could preserve the intelligibility of history and the dignity of humanity” (51). Muchnik then posits an affinity between Kant and Nietzsche’s Zarathustra in that both see that “with God both guilt and evil are also born” (55)—a point from which Kant, at least,

draws the conclusion that “any successful vindication of God’s goodness must at the same time be a vindication of our own humanity” (55). Muchnik sees this as the basis for a distinctive Kantian theodicy founded on “the fundamental anthropological fracture Kant called ‘unsociable sociability’” (56). Muchnik’s account is provocative on at least two counts: first, it locates the conceptual center of gravity of Kant’s vindication of God’s goodness in Kant’s anthropology and philosophy of history; and, second, it suggests a theological account of evil deeply rooted in the dynamics of the human formation of the concept of God.

In “Religious Assent and the Question of Theology: Making Room for Historical Faith,” Lawrence Pasternack, who has written extensively on Kant’s concept of “faith,” explores the character and implications of “Kant’s dramatic commitment to Pure Rational Faith in the B-Preface to the first *Critique*” (100). This exploration provides a basis for a claim that “faith rather than knowledge is, for Kant, the mode of assent proper to religion” (105). To support this claim Pasternack explicates Kant’s defense of Pure Religious Faith by highlighting the importance of two positive features: first, that “it engages the will in a way that is not possible for other modes of assent” (107) and, second, that “[because] faith can, unlike knowledge, be chosen, in faith one achieves a cognitive state as the result of one’s moral interest” (107). The latter point, which Pasternack sees operative in Kant’s argument for the Highest Good in the first Preface to *Religion*, is significant. It is not just that faith fills some kind of cognitive “gap” that theoretical reason cannot cross, making it “a fallback in the light of limits to theoretical knowledge” (109). It is rather that “our acceptance of the Highest Good and its Postulates make possible *a commitment to the Moral Law that, if not for, faith, we could not have*” (109, emphasis added). In larger terms, this means “not merely that practical reason can go where the theoretical cannot go, but that the former has a ‘prerogative’ to do so.” This prerogative is thus “what it means for practical reason to have ‘primacy’ over the theoretical” (109). Pasternack then turns to the relationship between Pure Religious Faith and the contents of “historical faith”; in accord with his earlier work, he argues for a more integral and nuanced connection between the two than usually proposed by accounts in which the image of husk or shell is the controlling trope for the function and value of historical faith. Such a connection allows him to see Kant as affirming Providence in terms of “a concursus in history [in which] God facilitates our efforts [to attain the Highest Good] through appropriately timed miracles and revelation” (116). This provides a context for the case Pasternack makes for historical faith as a form of “holding-to-be true” (*Fürwahrhalten*) rather than a belief “as-if,” a point put unambiguously in a footnote: “the work that has been done on Kant’s conception of Pure Rational Faith should now make it clear that it is a full-fledged holding-to-be-true, a conviction with certainty, rather than some practically grounded self-deception” (117). Pasternack’s account is provocative for the robust role that it assigns to the practical interest of reason in the assent proper to faith, a role that opens a path for theological reflection on Providence that enables us “to see our lives as part of a history advancing toward the Highest Good” (117).

In “What Perfection Demands: An Irenaean Account of Kant and Radical Evil,” Jacqueline Mariña addresses a frequently raised criticism of Kant’s treatment of radical evil: It harbors an unresolvable incompatibility between its two basic claims, one about the universality of radical evil, the other about moral responsibility for radical evil. According to the first, radical evil is a moral disposition attributable, without exception, to every member of the human species. According to the second, moral responsibility for that disposition lies in each agent’s free choice: “This disposition [radical evil] must be adopted through the free

power of choice, for otherwise it could not be imputed" (183). Mariña states the incompatibility thus: "...if we are truly free to choose our moral character, then *prima facie* we are not warranted in claiming that *all* human beings (all those that have existed, and those yet to be born) will have a morally corrupt disposition" (183). The response she offers to this criticism is intriguing, particularly on methodological grounds, in that it points to an important, but often overlooked, dimension of almost any philosophical engagement (not just Kant's) with "the question of theology": Attention should be paid to the models and tropes functioning in the formation of particular theological and philosophical conceptualities. In the instance of radical evil, Mariña draws attention to this dimension and its importance by noting that more than one model of the origin and overcoming of evil has entered into Christian theology during its long history. While the model associated with Augustine, in which "human beings, fully formed and in the presence of God...inexplicably turn away from God and fall into evil" (185), has been the dominant (though not unchallenged) one, there are others, including an older, important, and still influential one associated with Irenaeus. In this model, the origin of evil and sin is located in human immaturity. Marina proposes that many interpreters have too readily assumed that the model Kant follows is the "Augustinian" one; in its stead, she proposes a developmental model along Irenaean lines that she sees in Kant's *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion* and the *Conjectural Beginnings* essay. She concedes that Kant's later discussion in *Religion* of the radical character of evil presents significant complications to a straightforward Irenaean model. To engage these complications, she sets forth a nuanced reconstruction of the account Kant gives, in *Religion*, of the interrelated roles played in humanity's struggle with evil by the elements in Kant's account: The "fundamental disposition" as a "freely chosen basic principle expressive of the complete *orientation* of the individual" (192); the "*predispositions* determining human nature" as well as their "corresponding incentives" (194); and the *propensity* as "it has to do with how things can matter to us, and the kinds of importance we assign to our affairs" (196). She articulates Kant's discussion as a phenomenology of human moral frailty that is "woven into human nature in terms of the infancy of the species, so that every human being, even the best, will be affected by the propensity to evil" and concludes, in Irenaean fashion, that "when confronted with the enormity of the moral task, the human conditions of frailty and finitude tempt to both impurity and perversity without thereby necessitating them" (200).

The following overview of the other essays indicates points deserving further investigation and/or threads connecting them with the essays treated above.

Nathan Jacobs's essay, "Kant on Divine Revelation: An Assessment and Reply in the Light of Eastern Church Fathers," offers a criticism of Kant's anthropology and its consequent restrictive view of the dynamics and possibility of revelation based a theological tradition not often engaged as a conversation partner for Kant's work: The anthropology and epistemology articulated in the writings of the Eastern Church Fathers. Jacobs draws upon this tradition for an ontology of the human person, particularly in terms of the intellectual capacities (*nous*) it bears as created in the image of God, and of the role played by divine energies in the human participation in the divine nature called *theosis* (divinization). By locating "divine revelation in the ontology of man"—in contrast to making it, as Kant sees it, a matter of empirical knowledge—Jacobs sees the theology of the Eastern Fathers providing a way to pose crucial questions that Kant leaves open about "human and divine ontology" and their bearing upon the "nature of revelation itself" (180).

In “Rational Religious Faith in a Bodily Resurrection,” the line of interrogation that Chris Firestone employs to engage Kant’s account of the key Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection consists of both philosophical and theological elements. The aim of this interrogation is “to consider whether the doctrine of bodily resurrection is a viable element of rational religious faith even if Kant himself did not include this doctrine in his own development” (228). After an overview of recent Kant scholarship exploring the theological development of Kant’s thinking represented by *Religion*, Firestone proposes the methodological/interpretive principle that “the doctrines of rational religious faith that emerge in *Religion* are a direct result of a theological method that puts the perspectives of philosophy and theology into dialogical conflict” (237). He articulates four premises of this method (p. 238), which he then employs in arguing to the conclusion that “Kant must give his critical consent that the rational end of man is immortal existence in an embodied state in which happiness is proportionate to virtue” (247). Both the methodological principles Firestone elaborates, as well as the particular argument and conclusion he proposes, deserve more extended discussion.

In “Divine Agency and Divine Action in Immanuel Kant,” William Abraham, writes from a theological perspective “interested in the renewal of robust editions of Christian doctrine” (138). He offers a theologically generous reading of Kant—notably with respect to the possibility of speaking about *particular* divine actions—based on what Abraham argues to be Kant’s own theological commitments. He stresses, in company with other essays in the volume, the importance of Kant’s account of humanity and human nature as a marker of those commitments. These provide space to speak in general terms of “divine creation and divine providence [and]...a general revelation given within the moral conscience of human kind” (157). Yet even in this space, Kant’s critical strictures on human knowing—which Abraham vividly images as “a shovel used for all too long to beat them [theologians] into submission”—still “disposes of any talk about specific divine action that goes beyond his pretty meager catalogue” (158). He thus urges theologians to “reject the shovel” to make it possible to “retrieve precisely those wonderfully rich accounts of particular divine actions that are so badly needed for the health of the church and the world in the present” (158).

The contributions of Keith Yandell, “Atonement and Grace in Kant: Some Reflections,” and Thomas McCall, “Christology within the Limits of Reason Alone? Kant on Fittingness for Atonement,” engage (among other topics) questions of the function and value of historical—i.e., contingent—facts and claims for Kant’s “moral radication of religion”¹ and their implications for his larger enterprise. These questions are framed in reference to their bearing on the intelligibility of the core Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Atonement (McCall) and their coherence with the larger lineaments of Kant’s moral theory (Yandell). McCall is quite clear that he takes Kant’s view to be that the historical “Jesus of Nazareth of Nazareth is not of vital soteriological importance” (216), a point with which, in a comment about the atonement, Yandell agrees: “These [the Cross, the Exodus] are Kantianly irrelevant, matters of history, not of moral religion” (211). More generally, McCall concludes, after considering some alternative Christological proposals, that “Kant cannot be considered a friend of traditional Christology, but nor can he be taken seriously as genuine

¹ I borrow this term from James Collins, *The Emergence of Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven & London, Yale University Press: 1967), 129.

threat to it" (227), while Yandel presents a list of seven conclusions, of which the most succinct and challenging might very well be that "Kant has no theory of atonement" (212).

Both James DiCenso, in "Practical Cognition of God," and James Joiner, in "The Kantian *Summum Bonum* and the Requirements of Reason," examine dimensions of the central role Kant gives to the practical use of reason as the basis for human affirmation of God. DiCenso provides an account of "Kant's approach to theology [that] stresses the primacy of practical reason and its realization by autonomous beings" (34), an approach he sees at work in *Religion* and all three *Critiques*. His account provides a useful basis for further articulation of Kant's understanding of "moral theology," and of the importance of autonomy, as enacted moral subjectivity, for the social instantiation of the realm of ends: "the human capacity to exercise freedom is decisive for the asymptotic realization of ends in the world" (30). Joiner places his account of practical reason in the context of Kant's "moral argument," leading to an examination of the meta-ethical placement of Kant's views in relation to the moral realist/moral constructivist divide. He then argues, provocatively, that "radical evil" presents a new antinomy for which Kant may need to articulate a further postulate, that of the "prototype" of morally perfect humanity, such as that proposed in the work of Firestone and Jacobs.

At one level, Leslie Stevenson's essay, "Kant versus Christianity," has affinities with what Firestone described as Kant's method in *Religion*, i.e., a "method that puts the perspectives of philosophy and theology into dialogical conflict." Lending interest to Stevenson's use of such dialogical conflict is that he takes neither Kant's philosophy (and the various interpretations it has generated) nor Christianity as fully stable and invariant in their content. While conceding that "Christians have diverged on how to interpret revelation and salvation" (126), he takes "creation, sinfulness and redemption" to remain "crucial themes" for Christianity (131) even as it has reinterpreted matters such as "cosmic time" in the light of modern science (130). Stevenson still shares the judgment of Kant's Prussian censors that "Kant's thought was subversive of Christianity," even while also noting the long shadow Kant's work casts upon later theology, even to this day—and he encourages the conversation to continue (136-137).

David Bradshaw, in "Kant and the Experience of God," focuses on Kant's arguments that there can be no experience of God. Although defending Kant's arguments as "stronger than they might first appear," Bradshaw further argues that "Kant seriously misunderstands the relationship between experience of and conceptual beliefs about God, and that when this relationship is clarified his arguments are seen as having little force" (80). Bradshaw turns to a number of biblical accounts to make this argument, remarking that, from a biblical perspective, "it is precisely the narrowness of what Kant thinks of as a possible experience of God that leaps to the eye" (87). In contrast to what Bradshaw sees as Kant's model—"envision[ing] the divine as a passive object of our inspection" (90) in which God is referenced to a concept such as "infinite goodness"—the model presented in biblical narratives is of an encounter with God's dynamic agency, one in which "far from simply appearing as an object that has to be assessed according to our existing conceptual resources, God actively intervenes to expand and deepen those resources" (90-91).

Overall, a valuable contribution.