

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Theology Faculty Research and Publications

Theology, Department of

8-2019

The Ethical Commonwealth, the "Son of God," and the Social Empowerment of Human Freedom

Philip Rossi

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

The Ethical Commonwealth, the “Son of God,” and the Social Empowerment of Human Freedom

In the account of a critically disciplined religion that Kant presents in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*,¹ he accords significance to the “Son of God” (the term he uses to refer to Jesus in this text) as a function of the moral accountability that human agents have for the good and for the evil that issues from their conduct. Such accountability, as Kant tersely puts it, bears most notably upon the shaping of one’s moral character through an entire life: “The human being must make or have made himself into whatever he is or should become in a moral sense, good or evil” (RGV AA 06: 44).² This accountability stems from autonomy, the capacity for moral self-governance that is central to Kant’s construal of human freedom as an exercise of practical reason; he thus continues, “These two [characters] must be an effect of his free power of choice, for otherwise they could not be imputed to him and, consequently, he could neither be morally good nor evil” (RGV AA 06: 44). This insistence on the moral accountability that issues from the autonomy of human reason is basic to the articulation of two fundamental claims that Kant’s critical construal of religion then makes about the moral import of the life and death of Jesus.

The first claim is negative, framed as a denial of a highly influential theological construal of Jesus’s role in the workings of good and evil in human life. This is the theory of a vicarious atonement in which Jesus stands as a sacrificial substitute, the singular agent whose suffering and death expiates all the accumulated (as well as all the future) moral evil and guilt of the entire human race. Kant rejects such vicarious substitution in that it runs counter to his construal of moral accountability as constitutively personal to each individual and thus as non-transferable:

¹ The following abbreviations are used for works of Kant referenced in this essay:

RVG: *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*. ET: *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason*, translated by George Di Giovanni, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, 1996, pp. 37-215.

GMS: *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. ET: *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*, translated by Mary J. Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy*, 1996, pp. 43-108.

Page references are to the *Akademie Ausgabe* (AA), the critical edition of Kant’s collected works (*Immanuel Kants Schriften*, Ausgabe der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: W. de Gruyter 1902-), according to the volume and page number—e.g., RGV AA 06: 44. English translations are from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, general editors (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993-2012), with the volume title and translator as noted above.

² For an extensive study of the significance of moral character for both Kant’s moral philosophy and his critical project as a whole, see G. Felicitas Munzel, *Kant’s Conception of Moral Character: The “Critical” Link of Morality, Anthropology, and Reflective Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999). She appositely remarks in the “Introduction,” “For Kant, character is a moral task definitive of our vocation as members of humanity” (p. 2).

Moreover, so far as we can judge by our reason's standards of right, this original debt, or at any rate the debt that precedes whatever good a human being may ever do (this, and no more, is what we understand by *radical* evil; cf. the first Section) cannot be erased by someone else. For it is not a *transmissible* liability which can be made over to someone else, in the manner of a personal debt...but the *most personal* of all liabilities, namely a debt of sins which only the culprit, not the innocent, can bear, however magnanimous the innocent might be in wanting to take the debt upon himself for the other (RGV AA 06: 72).

The second claim is a positive one that offers an alternative to the substitutionary account that Kant rejects. It proposes that, in the human struggle with good and evil, Jesus functions as a "prototype," in whose words, life conduct, and willingness to endure an "ignominious death" human agents may recognize the "moral disposition [in them] in its entire purity" (RGV, AA 06: 61). In this role, Jesus does not function as *an example for imitation* (RGV AA 06: 64)—which Kant's sees as potentially eroding the robust sense of accountability encoded in human moral autonomy—but as a *model for the moral self-recognition* that empowers agents to acknowledge the accountability for good and evil that structures the exercise of their agency *as moral*.³ This self-recognition of the accountability fundamental to moral autonomy makes it possible for agents to order properly the maxims determining their conduct. Such proper ordering consists in an agent's recognition and assent to the universally binding character of the moral law, i.e. to the categorical imperative as the supreme principle of morality that unconditionally overrides the maxims of self-preference and self-exemption stemming from the "dear self."⁴ Such self-recognition of accountability to this principle, which encompasses an assent to the moral ordering of maxims that it empowers, constitutes "the revolution in [their] mode of thought" (RGV AA 06: 47) that overcomes and extirpates the self-inflicted radical evil of self-exemption and self-preference.

Kant adduces a variety of considerations on behalf of these claims, and these have long received scrutiny, positive and negative, by philosophical and theological commentators from a range of interpretive perspectives. My goal in this essay, however, is not to parse yet again Kant's arguments for these claims. It is rather to engage the second claim in order to ascertain whether the role it gives to Jesus in evoking an agent's self-recognition of the accountability embedded in

³ Kant's points to such self-recognition framed by the prototypical role of Jesus at RGV AA 06: 62: "In the *practical faith in the Son of God* (so far as he is represented as having taken up human nature) the human being can hope to become pleasing to God (and thereby blessed); that is only a human being conscious of such a moral disposition in himself as enables him to *believe* and self-assuredly trust that he, under similar temptations and afflictions (so far as they are made the touchstone of that idea), would steadfastly cling to the prototype of humanity and follow this prototype's example in loyal emulation, only such a human being, and he alone is entitled to consider himself as not an unworthy object of divine pleasure."

⁴ Kant uses the expression "the dear self" in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* GMS, AA 04: 407.

autonomous moral agency encompasses even more than that of enabling an *individually focused* moral revolution. The question here is whether the revolution in one's "mode of thought" consequent upon a self-recognition of the one's accountability has a social as well as an individual dimension within Kant's account—i.e., does it also include a dimension pertaining to one's relationality and accountability to other moral agents? If so, does the prototypical role that Kant assigns to Jesus then function as more than simply a basis from which each moral agent may singly—and seemingly in isolation—hope for a life-long commitment to morality that stably places one "upon the good (though narrow) path of constant progress from bad to better" (RGV AA 06: 48)? Does the prototypical function attributed to the Son of God provide a basis not only for an individual agent's hope for "an ever continuing striving for the better" (RGV AA 06: 48) but also for what may be appropriately termed a *socially* focused hope as well, a hope that bears upon the dynamics of the relationality that is proper to humanity as a species?⁵

In response to these questions I will argue that, even though such an individual moral revolution is central both to Kant's insistence on individual moral accountability and to the sustaining of individual's life commitment to morality, his account also leaves space for Jesus to play another important role for the moral ordering of human life. This is a role complementary to the dynamics of individual moral conversion; it bears upon the *social dynamics* that mark the establishment and the workings of the ideal moral community, the "ethical commonwealth," that Kant sees the church called upon to instantiate in increasing scope and depth in the ongoing course of human history. Kant's account of these social dynamics serves to open the possibility of discerning a further moral role for Jesus as Kant portrays him "within the boundaries of mere reason."

The context of human moral relationality provided by the ethical commonwealth allows Kant to depict Jesus as fundamental point of reference for the *social empowerment of human moral agency* for the formation and sustaining of an enduring moral community that has a transformative role in the concrete circumstances of human history. This social empowerment is embedded in very trope of an "ethical commonwealth": a moral community that is enacted and sustained from the recognition of the shared mutual responsibility in which human moral agents stand to one another in virtue of the exercise of their finite moral freedom as an agency for giving shape to human culture

⁵ A more comprehensive response to this question than can be given in this short essay would require a careful parsing of Kant's phenomenologically astute characterization of the dynamics of human relationality as "unsociable sociability." See Allen Wood, "Unsociable Sociability: The Anthropological Basis of Kantian Ethics," *Philosophical Topics*, 19: 1, (Spring 1991): 325-351 and Holly Wilson, *Kant's Pragmatic Anthropology: Its Origin Meaning, and Critical Significance* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006), Chapter Three, "Kant's Theory of Human Nature," pp.43-59, for useful frames of reference for such parsing.

and history.⁶ This social empowerment extends the moral accountability of individual agents to encompass not only an individual moral revolution, but also what Kant understands as humanity's moral vocation as a species to participate throughout the course of history in the enactment of "the highest good possible in the world."

Within the context of this human "species vocation," Kant's account of the role of Jesus, as one who proclaims the coming of a "kingdom of God," opens the possibility that humans are called upon to act in a distinctively "godly" manner in their social interaction with one another. In relation to this species vocation, Jesus' most godly activity can be seen to consist in making it possible for human beings to recognize the *social accountability* that is structurally embedded their moral freedom.⁷ This is the recognition that humanity as a species is called upon to exercise moral freedom to establish a social order in which it becomes increasingly possible to enact good *together*. Fundamental to doing so will be the (gradual) overcoming, by the enactment of full mutual respect for one another's freedom, the human divisiveness that, arising from the dynamics of self-preference, that pits us against one another in multiple social forms of radical evil, of which the most virulent is war.

Kant suggests this possibility by portraying the redemption that Jesus models for humanity as a liberation from the grip of a radical evil that, by its corruption of individual moral agency by maxims of self-preference, has led to a pervasive state of social divisiveness, that was pointedly imaged by Hobbes as a constant state of war. Jesus, as Son of God, provides the condition for such social liberation in the establishment of the Kingdom of God, which Kant explicitly characterizes as an empowerment of human freedom that brings with it social as well as well as individual effects. The Kingdom of God, as the religious counterpart to the ethical commonwealth, provides a socially framed moral space for a liberation from the bondage to the evil of asocial self-preference for the dear self, a preference that goes "down deep" in human moral agency. This liberation not only serves the moral freedom of individual human agents; it also enables the freedom of humanity as a species to function socially in the context of the moral community that Kant terms the ethical commonwealth:

⁶ In terms of a common theological distinction, Jesus's role with respect to the moral recognition of agency that enables the overcoming of radical evil is one that thus functions for the individual with respect to "justification." The further role I am suggesting, one of social empowerment in an ethical commonwealth, may then be considered to provide the community with conditions that enable it to be a locus for "sanctification."

⁷ Among the articulations of the Categorical Imperative that Kant proposes, the formulas of universal law, of autonomy, and of the realm of ends point most explicitly to the social accountability that agents owe to one another as co-equal proposers and enactors of universal moral law.

...by exemplifying this principle (in the moral idea) that human being [i.e. Jesus] opened the doors of freedom to all who, like him, choose to die to everything that holds them fettered to earthly life to the detriment of morality; and among these he gathers unto himself “a people for his possession, zealous of good works” under his dominion, while he abandons to their fate all who prefer moral servitude (RGV AA 06: 82).

This passage, indicating a social dimension to Jesus godly activity of effecting the release of human freedom from bondage to the grip radical evil, is found near the conclusion of Part Two of *Religion*. This location is significant in that Kant’s arguments here, even as they are focused primarily upon the grip that radical evil has upon the dynamics of individual moral agency, are cast nonetheless in social and political images. Kant’s reconstruction here of Christian teaching about how God effects human redemption in the person of the Son of God articulates it as a conflict between radical evil and the good principle over which has rightful claim to moral dominion over human beings. This political image reinforces the function of this passage as a prelude to Part Three’s more explicit and extensive discussion of the social dimensions of radical evil and of the ethical commonwealth as the locus in which human moral agents are called upon to engage one another’s freedom in concert for the overcoming of radical evil in its social, as well as in its individual forms.

The ethical commonwealth thus provides a relational context from which agents can envision the highest good to be attained through human freedom to pertain to humanity as a socially and historically situated species, not merely to individual human agents. In addition, the perspective provided by the ethical commonwealth enables one to envision the exercise of human freedom as itself functioning *to shape the social conditions in which human agency is exercised* for attaining the highest good. The highest human social good is achieved not through a mere aggregation of individual efforts, coordinated by a moral analogue to pre-established harmony, but through agents’ shared attention to the dynamics of the mutual respect due one another’s freedom in the interactions that shape the social conditions for dwelling with one another within the finite confines of our planet.

Kant further indicates, moreover, that the manner of Jesus’s life and death has import for this social hope: Within the context of this human species vocation, Jesus, as Son of God opens the possibility for humans to act in a distinctively godly manner in their social interaction with one another. In relation to this species vocation, Jesus’ most godly activity can be seen to consist in making it possible for human beings to recognize the *social accountability* that is embedded in the exercise of their moral freedom: As a species, humanity is called upon to exercise moral freedom in a manner that establishes a social order that provides conditions for humans, in concert with one another, to manifest that full respect for one another’s freedom that overcomes the evil of social divisiveness. This empowerment of mutual respect has its point of reference in the life and death of

Jesus, which “most strikingly displays the contrast between the children of heaven and the bondage of a mere son of earth” (RGV AA 06: 82).

In so strikingly displaying this contrast Jesus, as Son of God, thus provides a prototype for human liberation from the radical evil of asocial self-preference and the social divisiveness of conflict, violence and war that it brings in its wake. In reference to this prototype of liberation that Jesus provides, we may then consider the efforts of human freedom to overcome, in the concrete conditions of human society, culture, and history, the divisiveness that is rooted in the radical evil of self-preference, as nothing less than human participation in the moral work of God. A key aspect of the godly conduct that the Son of God prototypically models for humanity is the conduct by which humans make it possible to live in genuine and lasting peace with one another. In other words, Jesus’s godly mode of living exhibited possibilities, formed in view of the social dynamics of mutual respect, for the overcoming of exclusivities and divisiveness in human social interaction, particularly those exclusivities out of which come the most violent and virulent forms of social conflict. In place of such exclusivities, Jesus proclaims, in the trope of the Kingdom of God, the formation of a moral community constituted by a social relationality that exhibits a dynamic of inclusive mutual respect that orients the lives of members to the horizon of inclusivity and universality.⁸ In conduct that is effective for bringing about an order of peace as the fulfillment of the humanity’s moral vocation, human beings can consider themselves to be taking part in the peacemaking work of God that is prototypically and pre-eminently modeled for them by the life and the death of the Son of God.

⁸ Kant sees the “vocation” of the church to provide, in the course of human history, an increasingly complete instantiation of such a moral community of inclusive mutual respect. In this regard, the church’s role in empowering the exercise of human freedom to bring into being the social dynamics that overcome division and conflict can be construed as complementary to that of a cosmopolitan perspective in providing conditions (particularly those of hospitality) for fostering the attainment of “perpetual peace.” The church, in the modality of an ethical commonwealth, thus serve as a locus for articulating, advocating, and instantiating those “godly works” of peacemaking and peace building for which Jesus serves as the prototypical model.