

Book reviews

Religious Studies 48 (2012) doi:10.1017/S0034412512000054
© Cambridge University Press 2012

James J. DiCenso *Kant, Religion, and Politics* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2011). Pp.viii + 294. £55.00 (Hbk). ISBN 978 1 107 00933 2.

James J. DiCenso's principal aim in this book is to show that Kant's inquiry into the nature and function of religion is not a minor topic but rather closely woven into his epistemological, ethical, historical, and political writings. His central thesis is that the pattern of all of Kant's work develops from an inner dualism which fundamentally structures it: that between heteronomy and autonomy. Heteronomy is variously defined by DiCenso to mean the product of physical coercion in the political sphere; the basis of truth claims and authority that refuses to be submitted to the tribunal of open public discussion and common criteria of assessment; the ground of thought systems of traditional metaphysics and rational theology; and the anthropomorphic servile faith that is imprisoned by fear and selfishness. Autonomy, by contrast, is described as the human capacity of reason to generate and follow universally applicable laws; a moral religion that supports us to develop ethical principles; and the ability to consider practical laws by their rational criteria of universality and inclusivity. This fundamental dualism between heteronomy and autonomy marks out the battle lines for Kant in his intellectual campaign to foster a world which advances human autonomy at all levels of society.

No less important than his purely intellectual and individual concerns is Kant's desire to ferment shared world-views in which religious and political institutions follow the path of autonomy and not the heteronomous ways that were so real for Kant during the reign of Frederick William II (1789–1797) and the suppression of his later writings on religion. It is this central hermeneutical key of the structuring dualism of autonomy and heteronomy in Kant's works that makes this book of both historical and contemporary significance. At a time in which enlightenment reason is back in the dock, DiCenso's new reading of Kant on religion and politics is a welcome addition to a steadily growing literature on this subject.

Of particular interest to students and scholars of Kant will be the fact that DiCenso grounds his argument in close textual interpretation of a wide range of

Kant's works and in doing so challenges a number of other interpretations and translations which he claims take Kant's ideas out of their relevant contexts. One important example of this is his claim that the work of Chris L. Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, inappropriately imports a species of scholastic theology into Kant's discussion of the prototype (*Urbild*) and so follows a recent trend of interpreting Kant as being much closer to traditional heteronomous theology than DiCenso's reading finds justified (cf., pp. 22, 241 n. 44, 244 n. 45). Read in the light of a range of current Kant interpreters, it is clear that DiCenso's Kant is the anti-dogmatic enlightenment thinker of modern autonomous reason, which defends the moral rather than the theological reading of Kant also shared by works such as Gordon E. Michalson's *Kant and the Problem of God*, Peter Byrne's *Kant on God*, and Paul Guyer's *Kant* (cf. pp. 240 n. 43, 208 n. 52).

The book itself, written at a level suitable for final year undergraduates and upwards, is well organized and opens with a helpful introductory chapter, in which DiCenso sets the scene for what is to follow by outlining his core structuring thesis and by defending a Kantian account of autonomous reason as still relevant to the concerns of human emancipation. DiCenso is writing here against the background of a number of critiques of the Enlightenment such as Jonathan Glover's *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* and John Gray's *Straw Dogs*. He wants to defend enlightenment rationality against such accusations that modern reason is bankrupt and naive in the face of contemporary understandings of psychology and the brutal realities of a more uneven vector of social progress than early optimistic enlightenment thought might have proffered. Whilst acknowledging the force and pertinence of these critiques, DiCenso seeks to defend the view that it is actually a lack rather than an excess of reason that is behind such immaturity and cruelty and that these moral failures are empowered by the often all too readily seductive forces of irrational ideologies and our own base emotions. For DiCenso the Kantian principles of practical reason are in no way superseded by such critiques but on the contrary still provide valuable resources to protect us against such moral failures and to sustain us in a healthy cultural coexistence within modern diverse and pluralistic societies.

In chapter 2, DiCenso turns to the wider epistemological and political concerns in Kant's work. Beginning with a discussion of the influences of Rousseau's social philosophy on Kant's ideas of autonomy and justice, he consolidates his core thesis that the defence of autonomy is linked to the ethical and political concern for justice, because once autonomy is sacrificed some groups are favoured over others, resulting in unjust social relations. Such social inequality issues out of former institutional arrangements of the *ancien régime*, which dominated Europe at the time. Following a commonly held assumption that early-modern absolutist nation-states arose as a reaction to the social chaos produced through religious wars, DiCenso argues that former structures of inequality and privilege are left

unchanged in the class-based societies found in revolutionary France and Kant's own Prussian state. The degree to which absolutism and religion are tied together in a heteronomous legacy of religious conflict has been questioned by theologians such as William T. Cavanaugh in *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, but in DiCenso's argument for the secular rational autonomous Kant, the command structure of absolute monarchy and the post-Tridentine Catholic Church are viewed as at least sharing a family resemblance with one another. Drawing on François Furet's *Revolutionary France 1770–1880* and Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, he defends the position which clearly exonerates Kant from sharing in this common account of traditional heteronomous theology in his defence of autonomy. At the fundamental levels of both how we obtain knowledge and how this can be legitimated, DiCenso argues that the core principle of autonomy is at work for Kant. In disciplining our use of reason against the immaturity of both enthusiasm and superstition our autonomy is bound together with publicly verifiable criteria for knowledge. For DiCenso this means that Kant's epistemology and analysis of religion is included in a wider ethical-political project of human emancipation. Just as trustworthy knowledge can only be obtained when we avoid the tendencies towards dogmatism and despotism of former metaphysical traditions by turning towards publicly accessible experience, so similarly can we build publically accountable and open political and religious institutions only when we rely upon the force of the better argument and not on the force of heteronomous tradition. Here DiCenso draws upon Kant's *What is Enlightenment?* to illustrate the interconnectedness of theoretical and practical rationality in the Kantian *opus*.

Following these general remarks about the internal relations between theoretical and practical rationality, DiCenso focuses in his third and fourth chapters on a detailed analysis of just how it is that human knowledge and the practical concern for autonomy are intricately linked in the first *Critique*. Through a careful analysis of the first *Critique*, he shows how Kant connects an account of the necessity of empirical intuitions for reliable knowledge together with the active role played by human autonomy in structuring these intuitions through the understanding. In so doing, he reveals how for Kant only empirical and publically verifiable criteria provide a reliable basis for knowledge of any kind. As a consequence, both supersensible knowledge claims that derive from metaphysical speculation and inherited knowledge claims based on traditional authority are rejected by Kant as falling outside the bounds of validity. Upon this epistemological basis Kant will erect his critique of both dogmatic metaphysics and traditional models of theology inherited from the past. The illusions, so firmly believed by both dogmatic metaphysicians and traditional theologians, derive not simply from falsely representing the nature of empirical reality but mainly from an incorrect application of the transcendental categories of understanding to hypostasized supersensible objects that are not connected to sensible intuitions. Transcendental

illusions are thus not mistakes of representation but rather of the application of our categories. But, as DiCenso stresses, this does not mean for Kant that metaphysics and theology have no meaningful applications. When the mistaken application of transcendental principles is clarified it is seen that they still have an important regulative and symbolic function that plays a significant role in the work of practical reason. At this point in his argument, DiCenso introduces the idea that the critique of dogmatic metaphysics and traditional theology is part of a much broader concern of Kant to rethink the meaning of the ideas of reason that are present in various metaphysical and theological concepts such as God, the soul, and the highest good. Through a consideration of the 'Transcendental Dialectic' of the first *Critique* DiCenso shows that even if for Kant the role played by the ideas of reason is different from that of Plato's ontological account, they both shared the view of their practical application in the realm of freedom. This paves the way for DiCenso to claim that Kant's epistemological work is but a prelude to his ethical and political theories, in which his theory of religion plays such an important role. In clearing away the errors of dogmatic metaphysics and traditional theology, such as their transformation of rules of thought into incorrect arguments for supersensible entities, the way is opened for Kant to investigate just how these heteronomous modes of thought have incarnated themselves in social and political institutions and organizations. Moreover, this necessary critical work allows the more positive reconstructive work of showing how, when correctly understood as ethical concerns of practical reason and not as transcendental realities of theoretical reason, these ideas can play an important role in the pursuit of freedom.

This concern for the ethical implications of these ideas is taken up in chapter 5. Here DiCenso draws chiefly on the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* to reveal how an understanding of autonomous ethics emerges once the shift away from supersensible knowledge is achieved in the first *Critique*. It is this ethical turn which underlies investigations of religion as a cultural and political reality. Kant's ethical reasoning is outlined as exhibiting two stages reminiscent of Jürgen Habermas's distinction between the moments of justification and application in his Kantian-inspired discourse ethics. The first stage involves an abstract formulation of universalizable principles which pay no heed to heteronomous and parochial interests. These provide an implicit normative critique of injustice, self-centredness, and favouritism at the methodological level as is expressed in the various formulae of the categorical imperative. This first stage is combined with a second one in which these abstract principles are applied to concrete social and political situations through acts of judgement. Purified of heteronomous tendencies, religious traditions are seen to provide valuable motivational resources for following ethical principles. Whilst these principles are based on ethics they infer social and political conclusions because of their inclusion of such concepts as other-directedness and the realm of ends.

DiCenso outlines the implications of these ethical principles for politically influential institutions through a reading of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* in the sixth and final chapter. Here he aims to ground his synchronic argument that religion is not a minor topic but rather closely woven into Kant's epistemological, ethical, historical, and political writings and that it is also intrinsically bound up with the reform of political institutions. Religions are seen as bearing either autonomous or heteronomous characters, which can influence how and whether true ethical principles are actually followed in particular cultural contexts. Drawing on religious representational language and symbolic mediations, DiCenso argues that Kant uses traditional ideas such as God and the soul to translate abstract formulae into a more appealing form that grips our inner dispositions with emotive force. As collective representations of moral ideas these biblical sources enliven abstract ideas through a legitimate use of our creative imaginations that does not transgress the limits of knowledge set out in the first *Critique* but rather makes them more clearly present in the public sphere. He concludes his exposition of Kant's *Religion* by analysing the concept of radical evil, which he views as a corruption of moral maxims into evil ones and as originating in our freedom of choice. This corruption is manifested in the conflict between autonomy and heteronomy, in which heteronomous models of God arise from the transferral of fallible human traits onto God. It is through fostering autonomous conceptions of God and by promoting an anti-clericalism which encourages non-authoritarian patterns of belief and institutional structures that a true ethical orientation in society is encouraged. Such true religion serves real virtue and expresses a practical holiness that is always directed towards the advancement of all.

The great quality of this study of Kant's theory of religion is its faithfulness to defending its central aim through systematically working out its main thesis. Chapters 3 and 4 demand a great deal of attention as they venture into difficult technical material, which at times risks losing even the attentive reader. However, difficult though this terrain may be it delivers the benefits of a carefully constructed argument grounded in close textual analysis and interpretation. The ultimate success of this work will depend on whether this synchronic hermeneutical thesis of the structuring dualism of autonomy and heteronomy is judged by Kant scholars to sustain the overall aim and claims made for the nature and function of religion in Kant's works by DiCenso. Whatever the conclusions that this scholarly engagement will turn up few general readers will finish DiCenso's work without taking away much of value from reading *Kant, Religion, and Politics*.

ANTHONY J. CARROLL

Heythrop College, London
e-mail: t.carroll@heythrop.ac.uk