

# Kant on the Role of Religion for Moral Progress

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## Abstract

This article examines Kant's understanding of moral progress, especially in his *Religion* where he argues that religion and, more importantly, the foundation of an ethical community are necessary to promote moral progress. However, it is less the identification of any factual moral progress but rather the *idea* of moral progress as an action guiding principle that Kant identifies as central. The conclusion shows how Kant's insights are in accordance with the argument that we should not look for comprehensive moral progress in history but adhere to the idea of possible future moral progress.

**Keywords:** moral progress, ethical community, visible and invisible church, propensity to evil, highest good

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## Introduction

Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell in their recent book *The Evolution of Moral Progress* emphasize that 'recognizing our moral achievements and that our progressive social movements can succeed even in the face of overwhelming opposition can energize ... further efforts at moral reform' (2018: 9). The authors claim therefore that we need a *theory* of moral progress (10ff.). First, this theory should have a classifying function, but in addition, it should 'provide an account of how the path of moral progress can be traversed that is compatible with [the relevant facts about human beings]' to 'show that moral progress is both *feasible* and *permissible*'. Furthermore, 'it should also supply some specific guidance as to *how* moral progress can be achieved' (27; cf. 31). Accordingly, a theory of moral progress provides us first with a *better understanding* of what moral progress consists in, and second with a practical guide to achieving it.

In contrast, postcolonial and decolonial theories have contested the idea of historical progress as a Eurocentric, hegemonic or neo-colonialist

misconception. In her book *The End of Progress*, Amy Allen states that ‘the developmentalist, progressive reading of history . . . and the so-called civilizing mission of the West, which . . . continues to underwrite the informal imperialism or neo-colonialism of the current world . . . order, are deeply intertwined’ (Allen 2016: 3). In current critical theory, Allen detects a propensity to combine the ‘commitment to progress as a future-oriented moral-political goal’ with a commitment to ‘the discourse of progress as an empirical history’ (6), ‘oriented toward the past’ (11–12). While the first conception comprises progress as ‘a moral-political imperative . . . that we are striving to achieve’, the second refers to ‘a judgment about the learning process that has led up to “us,” a judgment that views “our” conception of reason, “our” moral-political institutions, “our” social practices, “our” form of life as the result of a process of sociocultural development describing progress as a “fact”’ (12). While acknowledging the significance of the first conception as it allows us ‘to strive to improve the human condition’, Allen is clearly critical of the second since it ‘ignores the extent to which the distinctively European form of modernity . . . was a product not of Europe alone but of Europe’s interaction with the non-West’ (17).

Kant addresses questions of *moral* progress in his critical writings concerning the highest good as the final end of human action (Silber 1963, Engstrom 1992, Moran 2012, especially ch. 1). Mainly in the third part of *Religion*, the question of how moral progress can be possible and ensured becomes the central topic of his analyses, both for the individual and at the social level (see Kleingeld 1995: 160). Here, Kant is concerned with the question of how morality can be realized in a community with other human beings, such that we can overcome the propensity to evil that we are confronted with in the presence of others, and with how the highest good can be realized in an ethical community. In the second division of this third part, he offers some historical-philosophical considerations regarding actual progress in the history of ecclesiastical faith.

In what follows, I will first summarize, with recourse to Kant’s critical writings, his conception of the highest good as the final end of moral action and explain the role the ethical community plays with regard to the highest good.<sup>1</sup> In section 2, I will analyse the idea of God as a legislator of this community and discuss why it should have the form of a church. In addition, the difference between the visible and the invisible church are examined as well as different functions of religious and ecclesiastical faith for the realization of moral progress, to which I return in section 3. Finally, in section 4, I will compare Kant’s moral-philosophical conception of an invisible church with his remarks on ecclesiastical

history and return to the distinction between progress as an imperative and progress as a fact. The conclusion shows how Kant's insights are in accordance with the argument that we should not look for comprehensive moral progress in history but adhere more to the idea of possible future moral progress.

### Section 1

While in his historical-philosophical works<sup>2</sup> Kant is primarily concerned with legal and political progress,<sup>3</sup> he treats questions of moral progress in relation to the 'highest good' as the ultimate purpose of human striving and acting. The realization of the highest good in its two meanings, namely the 'supreme' and the 'complete', should be possible.<sup>4</sup> Virtue as 'supreme condition' presupposes that the respective disposition completely conforms to the moral law, which Kant calls 'holiness'; this holiness must therefore be 'just as possible as its object is' (*CPrR*, 5: 122). However, this can only be an idea of regulative function since human beings can always succumb to their inclinations and are never able to have a completely moral disposition (*ibid.*). If they should nevertheless aspire to it, it must be assumed that they can 'in an *endless progress* ... [attain] complete conformity' (*ibid.*). Only if this possibility exists, can human beings be asked to strive for holiness. At the same time, as not holy but a finite rational being, a human being can never be sure to achieve this end. Thus, as Allen Wood highlights:

man ... can only seek holiness through a maxim of steady progress toward it. Thus, when Kant speaks of the good man's highest maxim as 'the maxim of holiness of the disposition', he is ... referring to ... a maxim of progress toward holiness, the maxim of 'incessant counteraction' against man's propensity to evil. ... 'The maxim of holiness of the disposition' is therefore only the maxim of constant moral progress ... (Wood 1970: 230)

Adoption of such a 'maxim of steady progress toward holiness' of course does not entail that we will ever in fact have morally improved, but rather refers to the idea that we *can* improve. For Kant, such possibility of progress requires however that the '*existence* and personality of the same rational being continues *endlessly*', which he translates as the 'immortality of the soul'.<sup>5</sup> Although as *finite* rational beings, we can only assume that we can gradually approximate perfection in our character, without this assumption we would face an ultimately futile prospect. Only the idea that human beings can get continuously closer to virtue by becoming more and more rational offers a way out.

In addition, we must also believe in the grace of God. Otherwise, given the fact that human nature is radically evil, it would not be possible for one, as Wood states, ‘to conceive of an appropriation of a “righteousness not his own,” and of the practical possibility of moral perfection’ (Wood 1970: 236). As he emphasizes, ‘man makes himself morally “receptive” to grace by becoming good “insofar as it is in his power” to do so’ (241); only then will God ‘complete by his verdict of forgiving grace these imperfect efforts to attain complete moral perfection’ (245). As Kant highlights in the first part of his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, ‘everyone must do as much as it is in his powers to do’. However, as human power is insufficient, hope is required that ‘what does not lie in [our] power will be made good by cooperation from above’ (*Rel*, 6: 52).

In any case God is needed for a second reason, namely with respect to the condition of happiness commensurate with virtue, as the second element of the highest good. Yet, whether virtuous actions will in fact lead to happiness of course does not depend merely on the agent’s will, since they may always be confronted with unexpected obstacles. Only the assumption of a God who accomplishes what human beings could not despite all their virtuous efforts – namely to rationally organize the world as a whole – allows the virtuous to hope for happiness.<sup>6</sup>

Although various points of interpretation might be discussed with regard to the summary just provided,<sup>7</sup> it should suffice for our purposes. In any case, in the third part of *Religion*, Kant complements his theses concerning the highest good, now focusing on the social dimension of human actions (Moran 2012, Pasternack 2014, 2017, Reath 1988). In these passages, he continues to be concerned with the question of how, or at least in what sense, human beings can overcome radical evil. His starting point here is the idea that ‘as soon as [a human being] is among human beings’ (*Rel*, 6: 94) ‘his nature ... will be determined by [envy], addiction to power, avarice and the malignant inclinations associated with these’,<sup>8</sup> and thus lacking a ‘principle which unites them’ human beings will endanger each other in their predisposition towards goodness and fail to progress against the propensity to evil.<sup>9</sup>

The *Critique of the Power of Judgement* and other writings suggest that ‘[d]eceit, violence, and envy’ as motives referring to others confuse human beings in their moral nature.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, human beings cognize the moral law through the power of reason and are motivated through a corresponding feeling of respect to act accordingly. However, again, as Kant states in the third part of *Religion*, this moral attitude becomes

corrupted by way of our relations with others.<sup>11</sup> And indeed, as Papish emphasizes,<sup>12</sup> this may even be so quite independently of any assumption regarding radical evil:

the failure to understand how others engage in [good works], and the failure to communicate or even fully grasp one's *own* approach to virtue ... can lead to social stagnation, confused or poorly articulated plans for action, distrust, and any number of civil conditions so divisive or problematic that we must regard them 'as if' they were the handiwork or machinery of evil. (Papish 2018: 221–2)

In response to this prospect, Kant reflects on a social structure that can contribute to preventing or reducing this negative social influence on our moral predisposition.<sup>13</sup> For as long as such a structure is missing, human beings remain in a state that, while ethical, can be described as an ethical state of *nature*. This is a 'state of an incessant combat through evil' that 'the natural human being ought to endeavor to leave behind as soon as possible'.<sup>14</sup>

This 'ought', however, is a special duty not merely of individuals but of all humanity with regard to itself. Its collective character, for Kant, is based on the consideration that 'every species of rational beings is objectively – in the idea of reason – destined to a common end, namely the promotion of the highest good as a good common to all'.<sup>15</sup> Thus, we must leave the ethical state of nature to avoid forfeiting that good to the propensity of evil.<sup>16</sup> In addition, insofar as Kant identifies the highest good as a common end, we seem constrained to look to some institutional structure to 'protect' it – in analogy to the protection of external freedom as the end of the politico-civil state (cf. Ebels-Duggan 2009: especially 14). Even though individuals might be able to remain moral by virtue of their own reason, the realization of the morality of all others and thus of their own happiness would still be in danger. The realization of the highest good thus demands that all persons unite themselves 'into a whole toward that very end, [i.e.] toward a system of well-disposed human beings' (*Rel*, 6: 98).

Kant refers to the idea of an institution in which these unified endeavours may be realized as an 'ethical community'. He considers this idea to be entirely different from that of a community of all acting in accordance with moral laws (*Rel*, 6: 98). For in the case of the moral law, we know that the required action could also be performed by us – an individual

'ought' implies an individual 'can'. By contrast, here we must work 'toward a whole of which we cannot know whether as a whole it is also in our power' (ibid.) – a collective 'ought' does not imply an individual 'can'. To compensate for individual weaknesses, or as Papish emphasizes, to avoid 'moral misunderstandings' (Papish 2018: 203), what is required is to unify 'the forces of single individuals, insufficient on their own ... [to achieve] a common effect' (*Rel*, 6: 98). Yet, each individual remains subject of this duty and must 'so conduct himself as if everything depended on him. Only on this condition may he hope that a higher wisdom will provide the fulfillment of his well-intentioned effort' (101).

## Section 2

Most crucially for our purposes, this hope for a completion of our limited efforts toward virtue requires the 'presupposition of another idea, namely, of a higher moral being' (*Rel*, 6: 98). Why exactly, beyond what we have already seen? First, in accordance with the already described function of the practical postulate, to compensate for the inadequacies of the individual's own actions: no one can set up an ethical community on their own. But whether others will contribute their part is uncertain. To strive for this realization, human beings must be able to hope that others will contribute their share to the realization of this collective duty. This hope again implies the idea of a higher being that can carry out what transcends our possibilities.

An additional function of this idea of a God, however, becomes visible when Kant also defines the ethical community as one of 'a people of God under ethical laws' in which 'all individuals must be subjected to a public legislation' (*Rel*, 6: 98). In a political community, the element that creates commonality must of course be public legislation. Therefore, 'all the laws binding [these individuals] must be capable of being regarded as commands of a common lawgiver' (ibid.). In contrast to a political community, however, in an ethical community 'the people, as a people, cannot itself be regarded as legislator' (99). The aim of such community is to promote morality. But since this consists in the right internal disposition, it is excluded from the start that it can be 'subject to public human laws' (ibid.). To such laws, only actions can be subject, since they alone are effects in the world accessible to others. Dispositions would need a different legislator, 'with respect to whom all *true duties*, and the ethical duty, must be represented as *at the same time* his commands' (ibid.). Only a lawgiver 'who knows the heart' and 'give[s] to each according to the worth of his actions' is able to 'penetrate to the most intimate parts of the dispositions' (ibid.). In Kant's view, such a legislator

corresponds to the ‘concept of God as a moral ruler of the world’.<sup>17</sup> As a result, ‘an ethical community is conceivable only as a people under divine commands, i.e. as a *people of God*, and indeed *in accordance with the laws of virtue*’.<sup>18</sup> Thus I agree with Pasternack and others that, despite Kant’s emphasis on individual responsibility, ‘God is clearly presented as ... the only one who can establish the ideal ethical community’.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, Kant rejects the idea that these laws of virtue can ‘be thought as *proceeding originally merely from* the will of this superior’ (*Rel*, 6: 99; emphasis added except for the word in bold font). For if these laws had their bindingness *only through God* and *their origin only in him*, they could not be considered to be ‘ethical laws’ or to refer to a disposition to the corresponding duty as ‘free virtue’ (*ibid.*). According to Kant, moral responsibility presupposes moral autonomy through which human beings can give themselves the moral law by virtue of their reason. If God were the legislator of those laws, then exactly this thesis of Kant would be in jeopardy. Thus Johannes Keienburg, for example, worries that the assumption of God as ‘origin and the supervisory authority of all morality contradicts Kant’s own premisses’ (Keienburg 2011: 132; my translation) that morality is only possible under a free will (131). How can God be the Lawgiver and humans at the same time act as autonomous beings?

One way to deal with this incongruity is to emphasize that Kant does not identify the foundation but only the *promotion* of morality as the end of the ethical community: as rational beings we still give ourselves the moral law.<sup>20</sup> The assumption of a lawgiver with exceeding authority leaves Kant’s justification of morality untouched and just serves to guarantee that we really comply with the moral law in community with others. Thus reason remains always the author of the moral law, and God is only the *co*-author of the laws in an ethical community,<sup>21</sup> determining only their form as ethical laws. Nevertheless, Kant ascribes the function of a ‘moral ruler of the world’ to the divine authority who sanctions our actions (*Rel*, 6: 99). To my mind, the most convincing way to fit this into Kant’s framework is simply to reduce it to the role of God with regard to the highest good, namely as the one who can save us by grace and if we, by acting virtuously, became worthy of happiness, *make us indeed proportionally happy*, without us acting however on this hope nor counting on it.

However, since for Kant such a community is to be that of ‘a people of God under ethical laws’ (*Rel*, 6: 98), it becomes clear why it is only

conceivable for him in the form of a *church*. Hereby, of course, I manifestly endorse a non-secular reading of Kant's conception of an ethical community<sup>22</sup> in addition, as above, to that of his conception of the highest good. For church is, as Kant stresses again just shortly after, conceived as nothing else than 'an ethical community under divine moral legislation' (*Rel*, 6: 101). However, this is not as one might think to speak of a *Christian* community of faith administrated and represented by the clergy in an organized institution. As Wood explains, Kant considers *church* as 'a community devoted to the strengthening in its members of religion, the inner disposition to fulfill all duties as divine commands' (1970: 192). On the other hand, Kant a little further on compares church to

the constitution of a household ... under a common though invisible moral father,<sup>23</sup> whose holy son knows the father's will and yet stands in blood relation with all the family members, takes his father's place by making other members better acquainted with his will; these therefore honor the father in him and thus enter into a free, universal and enduring union of hearts. (*Rel*, 6: 102)

The proximity of this analogy to Christian images is quite obvious but the moral meaning is paramount.<sup>24</sup>

In equal keeping with the Christian tradition, Kant differentiates further between the 'invisible' and 'the visible' church. Luther, for example, distinguishes following Augustine between the 'invisible' or 'spiritual' and 'the visible Church'.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Calvin distinguishes between the visible and the invisible church (Calvin 2002: IV.1.7, p. 628). Whereas the invisible church is the church of the truly elected, the visible church also has dissemblers in its ranks.<sup>26</sup>

For Kant, church as invisible is a 'mere idea of the union of all upright human beings under direct yet moral divine world-governance'. As such, 'it is not the object of a possible experience' (*Rel*, 6: 101). The visible church, however, is 'the actual union of human beings into a whole that accords with this ideal'.<sup>27</sup> Thus Kant characterizes the (true) visible church as being open to all human beings and as being based on moral incentives. Moreover, its members belong to it by free will. Finally, it should only be modifiable in administrative concerns. Its constitution should be unchangeable.<sup>28</sup> No doubt, the visible church that Kant had in mind does not coincide with any existing institutionalized Christian church<sup>29</sup> because the churches that existed at the time of



his writing were at odds with each other and were by no means exclusively based on a morality guided by reason. In addition, most human beings did not deliberately choose to be members of a church or any other religious community. Moreover, their ecclesiastical constitution was always subject to change.<sup>30</sup>

Kant's true visible church diverges from the invisible only in its form of appearance and not in its content or in its claim to truth. It provides the invisible idea with the necessary reality in experience, for a church, as a 'union of many human beings of equally many dispositions in a moral community, needs a *public* form of obligation' (*Rel*, 6: 105, translation slightly adapted) and therefore an organization handed down historically. And it is the task of human beings to accordingly realize and organize such a community. This argument might support a more secular reading of Kant's ethical community. However, even though Kant emphasizes the efforts of human beings, that community should still be organized in form of a *church*: they must strive for its realization by giving it, on the one hand, a public obligation in the form of (divine) statutory laws and, on the other hand, acting virtuously and, as I will explain shortly, approximating its ecclesiastical faith to pure religious faith. Indeed, many of the attempts at realizing such a church have shown a rather 'unhappy result' (*ibid.*), but human beings should not give up the idea that its approximation is possible.

### Section 3

Thus the realization of the true visible church<sup>31</sup> becomes the aspiration of all moral progress. All human beings should strive to achieve it jointly by founding a visible community on the (invisible) idea of the unification of all human beings under divine commandments. Admittedly, Kant considers it as rather 'presumptuous' to declare the laws founding the church 'straightaway as divine and *statutory*', 'in order to spare ourselves the trouble of improving the church's form further' (*Rel*, 6: 105). However, he deems it

just as arrogant peremptorily to deny that the way a church is organized may ... also be a special divine dispensation, if ... the church [seems obviously] in perfect harmony with moral religion, and if, in addition, we cannot see how it could ever have made its appearance ... without the requisite preparatory advances of the public in religious concepts. (105–6)

In my view, this passage equally indicates that Kant does not want to release human beings from their duty or responsibility to establish an ethical community.<sup>32</sup> Yet, he admits the limitation of human capacities to conceive of its possible divine origin: such knowledge exceeds our knowledge just as we cannot know whether particular actions are morally good. In any case, here again, moral progress is described by Kant as a duty (common to all) and not as a fact.

Thus a certain tension becomes manifest. Admittedly, an ethical community must be perceptible to the extent that all members find themselves unified in an institution with a shared principle manifesting itself in some form of visible practice. Yet, the right choice of the highest maxim underlying all moral action is not perceptible to the public. The ethical community shall, for one thing, be visible through statutory laws held as divine, but then again, Kant assigns such laws, relative 'to our purely moral judgment', as 'arbitrary and contingent' (*Rel*, 6: 168). Accordingly, to regard such laws as 'essential to the service of God in general' Kant considers a 'delusion of religion, and acting upon it' would mean acting 'directly contrary to the true service' (*ibid.*). How may it nevertheless be possible, asks Flikschuh for example, that the 'visible church of the invisible community of the worshipers express ... outwardly the divine will without thereby taking on the characteristics of a public legislative power and jurisprudence whose claim to authority Kant afterwards rejects as counterfeit service?'<sup>33</sup>

The complex relation between the visible and invisible church may become at least slightly clearer by taking into account Kant's corresponding distinction between religious faith and ecclesiastical faith. While true religious faith merely implies '[fulfilling one's] duties toward human beings' (*Rel*, 6: 103) and thus equals moral faith (see Wood 1970: ch. 5), ecclesiastical faith as a historical belief in divine revelation tends towards the obedience to statutory laws (106). Unambiguously, a true church is based on the obedience to the moral law as its constitutive principle, which means that it is based on religious faith. Thus Kant is certain that we do not have to do other than to act morally to worship God (112). Yet, he also considers religious faith as insufficient to establish a church (103) because honouring God only by 'mere reason' is not possible in a church (105). He explains this by the fact that human nature is finite: human beings cannot consider themselves obligated by virtue of obedience to God unless they seek 'to please him through passive obedience, however morally indifferent the actions might be in themselves' (103). Kant concludes that ecclesiastical faith is better placed than religious faith

to motivate human beings to unite themselves in an ethical community and thus precedes the latter (106), for he perceives a ‘natural need of all human beings to demand for even the highest concepts and grounds of reason something that *the senses can hold on to*’.<sup>34</sup> This need ‘must also be seriously taken into account when the intention is to *introduce* a faith universally’ (109).

Hence, it is to ecclesiastical faith that Kant ascribes the important task of accommodating the weakness of human nature. Yet, he does not spell out how human participation in ecclesiastical faith can become finally representative participation in ‘true religion’, necessary for the realization of an ethical community as a kingdom of God. An ‘historical’ ecclesiastical faith, he argues, does not serve the actual moral end and is ‘something in itself entirely indifferent, and one can do with it what one wills’ (*Rel*, 6: 111; translation slightly modified). It is only as a ‘means to [the] promotion and propagation’ of ‘moral legislation, through which God’s will is originally engraved in our hearts’ that Kant gives serious weight to ecclesiastical beliefs (104): examining the historical faith in revelation and its statutory laws is necessary to determine whether they harmonize ‘with the universal practical rules of a pure religion of reason’.<sup>35</sup>

The duty to approximate ecclesiastical faith more and more to religious faith, and thus to reason, implies an epistemic dimension of progress.<sup>36</sup> As Kant admits, we all know the moral law by means of our reason and thus we should also know that true religion only consists in fulfilling one’s ‘duties toward human beings’. However, if ecclesiastical faith is not identical with pure religious faith but only gradually approaching it, then its moral content may only become gradually epistemically accessible. This process might be understood as a form of epistemic progress eventually leading however to progress in practice. The actual content of religion consists, for Kant, in the ‘moral improvement of human beings’ (*Rel*, 6: 112). All interpretations of the Bible should take that as their principle of orientation.<sup>37</sup> Only insofar as traditional ecclesiastical faith corresponds to this end does it have moral authority (cf. *ibid.*). Acknowledging indeed a certain utility of ecclesiastical faith,<sup>38</sup> Kant thus denies any existing church’s authority to determine itself which parts of the doctrines are relevant for true religious faith. Instead, he claims that ‘scholars submit their interpretations to public scrutiny’ (114), namely through reason shared by all human beings, and thereby ‘remain always open and receptive to better insight’ (*ibid.*). Here again, some sort of epistemic moral progress (equally not separable from practical progress)

comes into play: human beings must be able to count on the agreement of the community, a point by which Kant reduces the content of ecclesiastical faith to its rational core.

To the assumption that individual moral progress is required and possible a further notion of progress is added, phrased as a *duty* to bring ecclesiastical faith closer to bare religious faith and thus to reason. This progress is both epistemic and practical: human beings must *understand* that ecclesiastical faith should equal religious faith. However, again, religious faith mainly consists in '[fulfilling one's] duties toward human beings' (*Rel*, 6: 103). Only then is the ethical community realized as a 'Kingdom of God' (101). And yet again, this idea of social progress is formulated as an *imperative* rather than an empirical *fact*, leaving it indistinct whether and how far any historical church, with its ecclesiastical faith, helps to realize that objective.

Kant's conception of an ecclesiastical faith is based, as Flikschuh observes, on the idea that its 'pragmatic function, leading the ignorant from the historical traditional belief of revelation to pure religious faith' (Flikschuh 2011: 199, my translation), is temporally limited: 'As soon as the ignorant are instructed, the ecclesiastical faith is needless' (*ibid.*). Flikschuh considers it bizarre that 'there should be a possibility of anyone ignorant in regard to reasonable faith' (*ibid.*) because, for Kant, each human being already has access to this faith merely by virtue of reason – without any idea of epistemic progress implied. With respect to this function, ecclesiastical faith would be redundant.<sup>39</sup> Yet, Flikschuh sees a different 'function of ecclesiastical faith indicated by Kant': the 'fortification of rational faith', for 'ecclesiastical faith preserves the "secrets" of the hope for God associated with morality'.<sup>40</sup> Concerning this second function, Flikschuh regards it as 'senseless to strive towards an abolition of ecclesiastical faith'.<sup>41</sup> The fortification of morality can never be completed, and thus it is not a transitional phenomenon but rather temporally unlimited, a Sisyphean task – there is no persistent development and thus no progress without the possibility of regress.

Yet, Kant advocates the gradual overcoming of the traditional forms of belief. For both our 'physical' and our 'moral predisposition'<sup>42</sup> demand that we free religion 'of all statutes that rest on history and unite human beings provisionally for the promotion of the good through the intermediary of an ecclesiastical faith', so that finally the 'pure faith of religion will rule over all'<sup>43</sup> – although this can only imply an ongoing process whose realization we cannot envisage in finite time.

This teleological perspective thus includes the hope that ecclesiastical faith might be overcome one day, and so it is only an early stage of true religious faith; the practice of faith in existing visible churches is in a way infantile. The obedience to holy rules could have been sensible in the past but becomes ‘bit by bit dispensable, yea, finally, when a human being enters upon his adolescence, turns into a fetter’ (*Rel*, 6: 121). When the human being has finally become an adult (122), everyone may follow the law that they prescribe for themselves and that they acknowledge ‘at the same time as the will of the world ruler revealed to [the]msel[ves]’ (*ibid.*). This will create an invisible conjunction of all who follow its order, for which the rules of the existing visible churches have at best initiated and prepared (*ibid.*).

This duty or imperative to approach the telos of a kingdom of God is associated, according to Kant, with the idea of progress identifiable in the gradual cessation of mere statutory laws and other ceremonies, or in the gradual approximation to the true church as one acts more and more in conformity with the moral law. Yet, it is not clear whether approaching the ideal of an ethical community does really lead to moral progress (beyond the idea that human beings can realize the highest good only jointly) and how this progress can be further defended against the persisting weaknesses of human nature. For morality requires the right choice of maxims and thus a ‘revolution ... in the mode of thought’, yet realizing the ethical community might only lead ‘to a gradual reformation in the mode of the sense’ (*Rel*, 6: 47), however progress made here may contribute to strengthen it.

#### Section 4

Thus we still do not clearly know whether and how *moral* progress can be realized. Yet, by expecting an approximation of ecclesiastical faith to religious faith or to the true church, Kant gives a normative criterion to evaluate the progress of an ethical community. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how and where such degrees of progress can be measured; and it is important to understand such progress not as tantamount to moral progress but rather as a ‘progress of ecclesiastical history’ (Brachtendorf 2011: 152, my translation).

Kant traces back such a development of ecclesiastical faith in the second division of the third part of *Religion*, as the ‘Historical representation of the gradual establishment of the dominion of the good principle on earth’. Here, where a backward-looking perspective is adopted for the first time, Kant first explains why he thinks Judaism does not qualify as an example of such ecclesiastical history. Namely, it does not constitute an ethical but

instead a merely political community.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Judaism lacks a public recognition of ‘its dependence on the restraining conditions of religious faith, and its necessity to conform to it’ (*Rel*, 6: 124). Therefore, it does not fulfil the conditions for the formation of an ‘ethical state of God’, nor is it possible for it ‘to make progress toward its fulfilment, under an autonomous principle’ (*ibid.*). Hereafter, Kant concentrates in his historical depiction on Christianity alone. For him, the ideal of the true church has already been realized in the life and ‘meritorious death’ of Jesus Christ, who ‘announced himself as one sent from heaven while ... declaring ... that servile faith ... is inherently null; that moral faith, which alone makes human beings holy ... is on the contrary the only one which sanctifies’ (128).

However, it is not possible, Kant concedes, to deduce from this exemplary sanctifying life-conduct ‘what effect its doctrine had upon the morality of its adherents’, since Christianity of that time had no ‘learned public’ that could have confirmed it (besides the fact that moral progress is not in any case perceivable) (*Rel*, 6: 130). The further development of Christianity Kant evaluates clearly negatively: futility, blind superstition, bad hierarchies, religious disputes as well as the takeover of the mundane realm by a clergyman who ‘ruled over kings ... by means of ... his threat of excommunication’ (131). In addition, he refers to the crusades and wars between Christians and finally to ‘bloodthirsty hatred against their otherwise-minded confreres in one and the same so-called universal Christianity’ (*ibid.*). Thus Kant summarizes the history of Christianity as abuse of power in the name of religion (*ibid.*).

Despite this evaluation of factual Christian history, Kant still sees its ‘true first purpose’ shining in Christianity, namely ‘the introduction of a pure religious faith, over which there can be no dissension of opinions’ (*Rel*, 6: 131). All quarrels and schisms result for him from ‘a bad propensity in human nature’ by which what initially was thought to serve as a means for introducing bare religious faith, namely converting the people ‘to the new faith, through its own prejudices’, became in fact its foundation (*ibid.*). Contrary to the true nature of original Christianity, in real ecclesiastical history the teaching of Jesus Christ did not serve as a support for morality and did not lead to any *factual* progress. Instead, there took effect in Christianity the ‘bad propensity’, the overcoming of which led Kant to introduce the duty to realize an ethical community.

From this evaluation of early Christianity Kant skips to his own time, praising the fact that in it ‘the seed of the true religious faith’ has been

sown and only needs to continue to ‘grow unhindered’ (*Rel*, 6: 131). Thus, possibly in contrast to his intentions and to readers’ expectations of a development history of factual progress, Kant states that the current positive situation does not result from any continuous learning progress but is solely the outcome of ‘reason’.<sup>45</sup> Reason is in fact identified as the indicator for such improvement, freeing itself from the ‘burden of a faith constantly exposed to the arbitrariness of its interpreters’ (132). Thus ecclesiastical faith does not only need a rational content but also believers enlightened by reason, and thus human beings who have already carried out a ‘revolution in the mode of thought’ (47) and only need to carry out a reform in the mode of the senses (*ibid.*). They are supposed both to acknowledge the utility of the rational message contained in the scripture and equally understand that neither disputing about all other elements nor urging anyone to believe in the content of this book beyond this message is conducive to moral progress. Furthermore, as Kant emphasizes, churches only fulfil their function of teaching the moral doctrine by explaining ‘what we must do to become worthy of [happiness]’ (133). And this knowledge, he adds, could also be accessible by mere reason without membership in a factual church (*ibid.*).

The foundation of an ethical community was supposed to serve, for Kant, to overcome the propensity to evil and to strengthen the natural predisposition to good. But it is the enlightenment of reason that has in fact transformed and advanced the existing churches. So we could conclude that the church can be conducive to the morality of its members simply insofar as it recognizes its own limits and does not demand from its members anything that cannot also be asked for by reason.<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, arguably, what is called for is a mere *politics* that does not interfere with questions of belief; rather it is, according to Kant, the ‘duty of the rulers’ (*Rel*, 6: 133) to safeguard these two principles of modesty in the interpretation of ecclesiastical faith and in its limitation to the protection of moral faith.

In his remark on ‘representation in a historical narrative of the future world’, Kant notices that it ‘is not itself history’ that allows for empirical prognoses (*Rel*, 6: 135). Instead it ‘is a beautiful ideal of the moral world-epoch brought about by the introduction of the true universal religion’ (135–6). Thus, according to Kant, we should ‘consider ourselves as actually the chosen citizens of a divine (ethical) state’. And concluding the third part he quotes Luke: ‘The Kingdom of God cometh not in visible form. . . . *For behold, the Kingdom of God is within you!*’

(136). Hence, Kant ends his history of progress in Christianity by claiming that we cannot empirically know its actual purpose, and therefore, this purpose cannot be part of history but rather must be inherent as a task in each human being. Indeed, while Kant does not believe that we can establish the ethical community and thus realize the highest good without religion and its institutions, he at the same time expects religion to be not only not unreasonable, but rather to arise from reason itself. So I would agree with the proponents of a theological interpretation that Kant does not defend a secular idea of the highest good in his *Religion*, but at the same time emphasize that in his view God, religion and church are based on reason to an extent that might in fact threaten the very distinction.

Kant's focus on reason and Christianity,<sup>47</sup> and his clearly contemptuous assertions concerning Judaism and Islam<sup>48</sup> in his *Religion*, do not make him a forerunner of critical, postcolonial social theory, even if one might concede him a more progressive position with respect to other aspects of his work.<sup>49</sup> In any case, concerning the idea of progress and the role it plays in realizing morality, the conclusions one can retain from Kant's *Religion* and other writings prove ambivalent. First, Kant obviously focuses on progress as *imperative*. Second, he nevertheless seems to tell an empirical story about Christianity which might be interpreted at first as an empirical story about factual progress. Yet, as Kant makes equally clear, there is no such continuous story but just evidence that the Christianity of his time might have been morally better than that of the Crusades or of the religious wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>50</sup> This comparative evaluation, however, seems to result mainly from the estimation that, as a guiding principle, reason (accessible to all human beings and not only to Christians) in fact became effective. *How* this happened nevertheless remains an open question insofar as it refers to a revolution in the mode of thought. Third, Kant claims that the end of all progress – the highest good – can only be reached jointly, presumably in the mode of some sort of *universal* community.<sup>51</sup> Yet, and perhaps exactly for the latter reason, as such an imperative, Kant's conception of progress may, after all, provide some sort of guideline for critical social theory – since particularly the idea that we can only progress in morality by striving jointly for an ethical community makes his practical philosophy more easily compatible with critical or postcolonial approaches. However, it remains to be seen just what secular form or forms might in fact be taken on by an ethical community as outlined by Kant.<sup>52</sup> And it remains unclear whether a possible prospective, empirically observable progress, in the form of what might be described as



an approach of the visible church to the ideal of the invisible church, or as that of societal ecclesiastical beliefs to a commonly practised morality guided by reason, can indeed be considered as specifically *moral* progress. For first, moral progress *per se* cannot be empirically observed. Second, given the finitude of human nature, it can never be permanently guaranteed – it will always remain a Sisyphean task.

## Notes

- 1 At the beginning of the third part of *Religion*, Kant characterizes the ethical community as an ‘association of human beings merely under the laws of virtue, ruled by this idea’ (*Rel*, 6: 94). See further section 3 of this article. With the exception of citations from the first *Critique* (in standard ‘A/B’ format), citations of Kant are by volume and page number from the Akademie edition (Kant 1900–). I use the following abbreviations: *CPJ* = *Critique of the Power of Judgement*; *Rel* = *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*; *CPrR* = *Critique of Practical Reason*; *G* = *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translations are drawn from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, which contain the Akademie pagination in their margins: Kant 1996, 1997, 2000.
- 2 See *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose, Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, and also the second conflict of the *Conflict of the Faculties*, the ‘First Supplement’ of *Perpetual Peace*, and the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (part II, section E.C., 7: 326ff.).
- 3 Cf. Höffe 2011: 21. Even where Kant explicitly discusses moral progress, he primarily refers to it in the development of the legal order. Certainly, this relates to the argument that the question as to whether there is a historical development in morality at all cannot be answered empirically and therefore cannot be part of history. However, even in his philosophy of history, the idea of moral progress is considered insofar as it is the telos of legal moral progress, namely, the establishment of a cosmopolitan state, so as to contribute to the morally good disposition of its citizens (see Kleingeld 2011: 87).
- 4 At *G*, 4: 396, Kant refers only to the supreme good. But earlier in the first *Critique* (A811/B839), he had already designated the *ideal of the highest good* as the ‘idea of such an intelligence, in which the morally most perfect will ... [would be] the cause of all happiness in the world, insofar as it stands in exact relation with morality (as the worthiness to be happy)’.
- 5 *CPrR*, 5: 122. See Perovich (1991: 166ff.) for a more detailed discussion of the postulate of the immortality of the soul and of its temporal as well as its atemporal aspect.
- 6 Flikschuh (2009: 103) explains: ‘the idea of God becomes a postulate ... the agent entertains as a mode of hope that arises not prior to action but from action itself. ... he hopes that God will ensure happiness in proportion to virtue’.
- 7 For example, Andrews Reath distinguishes a secular from a theological reading of the highest good (Reath 1988). The theological reading of the highest good, he criticizes, attributes ‘only a limited role to human agency’ (609). In contrast, Lawrence Pasternack emphasizes that we must distinguish between our and the divine tasks in the realization of the highest good: ‘while we have a duty to promote HGi [the Highest Good as ideal]’, ‘God is postulated as the agent through which happiness comes to be distributed in proportion to moral worth’ (Pasternack 2017: 448). In addition, we also rely on divine aid concerning the foundation of an ethical community (449); indeed, we can only realize it through this divine aid (453; and further in the present section).

- 8 Ibid. This idea reflects well the first part of Kant's thesis of 'unsocial sociability' (cf. *Idea*, Fourth Proposition, 8: 20).
- 9 *Rel*, 6: 96. Wood points out that Kant 'attributes the corruption of human nature to the social condition of human beings, and ... to the concern over comparative self-worth that characterizes people wherever they live in proximity to one another' (Wood 1999: 288). There is of course scholarly discussion as to this point. See e.g. Pasternack (2014: 115 ff.), Papish (2018).
- 10 *CPJ*, 5: 452. See also *Idea*, *Conflict of the Faculties*, *Anthropology*.
- 11 Since the human propensity to evil in general remains, for Kant, inexplicable, his explanation cannot be a complete one. See Wood 2014: 50: 'This is not a causal explanation of the propensity to evil ... It does not do away with the inscrutability and incomprehensibility of evil, on which Kant repeatedly insists'. However, Kant further explains his thesis in his historical writings, especially in *Idea*, as well as in *Anthropology*, when he states that this is how the human race develops towards culture. See also Pasternack 2014: 177ff.
- 12 See Papish (2018: 215) who states that '[n]o presumption of badness is advocated by Kant or needed to make sense of either the strife individuals are vulnerable to or why we must exit the state of nature'.
- 13 Of course, Kant also thinks of the juridical state as playing this function but obviously does not consider it as being sufficient to prevent the negative social influence on our moral disposition.
- 14 *Rel*, 6: 97 (in part my translation).
- 15 Ibid. See Wood 1999: 313: 'For Kant, it is crucial that human beings think of themselves as belonging to a moral community, of which all rational beings could regard themselves as members. This community is to be united through the concept of a single end that its members consciously pursue *in common* as a *shared end*.' And in his book *Kant's Moral Religion* (1970), Wood highlights that 'for Kant the highest good is sought ... in an entire *world* of persons, each with an absolute value and dignity as an end in himself' (188). For Wood 'Kant's "philosophy of religion" ... is part of his social philosophy, and it is ... [here] that Kant gives decisive expression to the role of human community in his ethics' (191). In his book *Kant's Ethical Thought*, Wood however emphasizes that already two formulations of the Categorical Imperative 'refer to the aim of a rational system of legislation that unites the end of all rational beings into a realm' (Wood 1999: 187). In contrast see Tampio, who critically points out that Kant concedes that Jews and Muslims live securely in this ethical community but without admitting them into full participation (Tampio 2014).
- 16 See again Papish (2018: 219ff.) who also argues that the main task of the ethical community is less the pursuit of the highest good than 'the mitigation of [mutual] misunderstandings'.
- 17 Ibid. See Anderson-Gold 1991: 128.
- 18 *Rel*, 6: 99. Laws of virtue differ from the moral law in that they are not prescribed *a priori* but in an ethical community with others.
- 19 Pasternack 2017: 455. Pasternack indeed admits that one may 'ponder whether or not religion must have practical relevance to *ECb* [the ethical community as it falls within our human purview]. Perhaps, then *ECb* ... need not have anything concretely to do with religious practices or beliefs' (457). Yet he concludes 'that there are no scholarly grounds to presume that Kant's use of "community" was at all intended as a signal of a secular shift' (458). Pasternack thereby directly challenges the secular reading by Reath (and others) of the ethical community (see Reath 1988: 615).

- 20 One may also understand it by analogy with Kant's idea of a league of nations that is not supposed to compromise the autonomy of each nation. See Papish on this analogy (2018: 209ff.).
- 21 See Wood (1970: 192) who highlights that 'God commands morally because He is holy and not because He has the power to coerce'.
- 22 Thus e.g. Papish emphasizes that 'the private relationship between an individual parishioner and the One who knows that person's heart' cannot easily be replicated 'in non-religious ethical communities' (Papish 2018: 226) However, there are noteworthy endeavours to update Kant's conception to adapt it to current social developments, and especially to a changing social function of religious beliefs. It is in this way that I understand Moran's interpretation (2012). She reads Kant's ethical community as a secular one and therefore also lays the focus on education, friendship and civic life as the fundaments of the ethical community.
- 23 The patriarchal bias of this analogy is obvious and might, of course, raise doubts as to whether a concept of this kind is appropriate under the auspices of gender democracy.
- 24 Papish emphasizes that Kant's 'ultimate aim is to convince us that a people can see themselves as strongly united even if they lack common ancestors or blood' (2018: 226).
- 25 See Atkinson 1968: 84.
- 26 However, this does not mean that Calvin rejects the visible church. To the contrary, it is only in and through it that human beings have a share in the invisible church (see Birmelé 2012).
- 27 Ibid. In contrast, Luther seems 'critical of any view of the Church as an organization, believing it to be rather a community composed of believers called of God' (Atkinson 1968: 177). Thus Kant's conception of the visible church would at first glance come closer to that of Calvin, who is more interested in its organizational form.
- 28 *Rel.* 6: 101–2. In line with this interpretation of the true visible church, especially regarding the first two characteristics, namely being open to all human beings and being based only on moral incentives, also Jews and Muslims should be able to fully participate in it (but see again Tampio 2014 who critically discusses Kant's view on this question).
- 29 One of the reviewers pointed out that 'when Christian believers . . . declare belief in "one holy catholic church" . . . they do not mean the Church of Rome but the spiritual body of all believers'. In this sense, the existing Christian churches could claim to fulfil the characteristics of the true visible church Kant is looking for. However, when for instance Luther understands by church a community of believers, it is not clear what visible form if any that church should have. In any case, it seems that Kant gives more credit than Luther to the visible form. Thus Kant's move seems to differ from both Calvin and Luther insofar as he doubles the ideal: both the true visible as well as the invisible church should be nothing else than the moral community open to all human beings.
- 30 Given that both the Catholic and the Protestant Churches – with questionable authorization – claim to be instituted by Jesus Christ, this constitutional claim exists unmodified throughout ecclesiastical history. Yet, if one considers for example the dogma of the Pope as deputy of Christ on earth as a constitutive element of the church, it has always been questioned by Protestant churches not only on an administrative level but also on a theological one. Kant would include what we count today under the ecclesiastical constitution, and what was and is subject to changes, rather in the domain of administration.
- 31 And as *true* visible church, it is also different from Calvin's conception, which does not presuppose the visible church to be in accordance with the invisible church.
- 32 Even though Luther, and foremost the Pietist tradition, prioritized faith in God's grace over any human action, Kant's emphasis on those efforts seems to be widely in

- accordance with Luther's conception of the *visible* church, which is not of divine but of human origin, whereas Calvin's understanding seems to emphasize its divine character, considering the church (also in its visible form) as 'part of God's plan of salvation'. See Birmelé (2012).
- 33 Flikschuh 2011: 209, my translation (see also 2011: 202–3). Habermas points to this ambivalence but describes it less critically: 'Kant abandons this strict dualism between the internal and the external, between morality and legality, when he translates the idea of a universal and invisible church, which is inscribed in all religious communities, into the concept of the "ethical community". With this, the "kingdom of ends" leaves the sphere of internality and assumes institutional form, on an analogy with an inclusive global religious community' (Habermas 2008: 225).
- 34 *Rel*, 6: 109. This concession to human nature and its need of sense perception is reminiscent of the biblical narrative of the conflict between Moses and Aaron, who wanted to accommodate the people's need of visual perception by means of the construction of a golden calf. See Wood (1970) who accordingly states that 'Kant does not condemn practices of this kind as such, but condemns the belief that they constitute a genuine duty to God, or an essential part of religion. This belief transforms faith (*Glaube*) into *superstition* (*Aberglaube*)' (195).
- 35 *Rel*, 6: 110. Concerning the criterion of rationality for ecclesiastical faith see Forst 2017: 92–3. It is important to notice Kant's overall – surprisingly – positive evaluation of historical religious practices e.g. in admitting the value of the scriptures. Papish attributes to them a 'unique potential because whereas traditions can be changed somewhat easily ... scripture has a more stable and transcendent character' and thus 'facilitate[s] especially broad forms of dialogue and mutual understanding' (2018: 224). Yet, their interpretation should promote 'the end of religion, which is "to make better human beings"' (Wood 2011: 142). In contrast, Kant is critical concerning the clergy (e.g. in part four, § 3). This may be rooted in his Protestant background (thus Luther himself combined a fundamental criticism of clerical praxis with an equally fundamentalist belief in any word passed down by the scripture).
- 36 Whereas epistemic moral progress (moral progress in belief) can be described as 'progress in grasping ... the "semantic depth" of particular moral concepts', 'moral progress in practice' concerns the question of 'how ... moral understanding is concretely realized in individual behavior or social institutions' (Moody-Adams 1999: 169). The idea of epistemic moral progress presupposes the idea 'of moral truths that are not sensitive to history' (Richardson 2018: 14) – we progress in better understanding these truths. Moral progress in practice can, but does not need to, be based on better understanding of morality: it may arise from other sources, such as 'social expediency' or 'enlightened self-interest' (Moody-Adams 1999: 183; see also Papish 2018: 191ff., who conceives moral progress in Kant's *Religion* generally as 'about cognitive work').
- 37 In the fourth part, Kant claims that 'universal human reason must be recognized and honored as supreme commanding principle in a natural religion within the Christian doctrine of faith; whereas the doctrine of revelation, upon which a church is founded ... must be cherished and cultivated as a mere means ... for giving meaning, diffusion, and continuity to natural religion even among the ignorant' (*Rel*, 6: 165).
- 38 See Papish (2018: 229) who elaborates further on the role of ecclesiastical faith for the realization of the ethical community.
- 39 Kant comments in a footnote at the end of the third part, emphasizing '[n]ot that it "will cease" (for it might always be useful and necessary, perhaps as vehicle), but that "it can cease"' (*Rel*, 6: 135fn).

- 40 Flikschuh 2011: 199, my translation. The hope of divine assistance being a postulate of practical reason, it cannot, theoretically, be empirically perceived, and so we never can really know whether, when and how in detail God helps with the realization of the highest good.
- 41 Flikschuh 2011: 199–200, my translation. In contrast with this rather positive evaluation of ecclesiastical faith Kant attributes, often in very polemic formulations, almost all elements of the ecclesiastical faith of his time to ‘counterfeit service’.
- 42 *Rel*, 6: 121. Kant does not explain here why we should overcome traditional forms of belief also due to our physical disposition. But he probably considers some forms of belief and religious practices as not beneficial to our happiness.
- 43 *Ibid*. This passage illustrates once again how far Kant is willing to go in his equation of reason and God.
- 44 It is obvious that Kant’s reading of Judaism presents a highly selective and pejorative picture of it. For critical assessment, cf. Brachtendorf 2011: 156ff.; Pasternack 2014: 196–201, 2015; see also Wood 2015.
- 45 One may plead that reason could have only been effective in the distinct historical form of an ethical community. Nevertheless, given the non-linear development of Christianity, even supposing it to contain the true germ from its beginning, it remains uncertain how exactly the ethical community of Kant’s time became more favourable than the previous ones.
- 46 See *Rel*, 6: 110–11, where Kant makes this claim for all religions.
- 47 Perhaps Christianity corresponds particularly well to Kant’s ideal of a rational religious faith as a result of his own rational appropriation of Christianity. Accordingly, Kant’s moral religion would not then be a universally rational, but only a Christian rational one. So one may conclude that this ideal is derived from his own obviously very rationalized idea of Christianity.
- 48 *Rel*, 6: 194; see Tampio 2014: 185ff.
- 49 Ajei and Flikschuh (2014) e.g. highlight Kant’s moral formalism as a resource to deal with the problem of colonial mentality.
- 50 That Kant tells this story about Christianity may be more expression of his criticism than of a defence of factual progress. It may also be understood as indicating that for the acceptance of *moral progress as imperative* we are psychologically inclined to rely on some historical evidence that such progress might have been realized at some point to some extent. But this assumption is very different from the idea that ‘there is progress overall’.
- 51 Richardson finds it ‘striking ... that a philosopher so well known for having isolated a single, a priori moral law nonetheless saw the need for the fuller social determination of morality ... also on the ethical side, in community and in the contingent course of history’ (Richardson 2018: 73).
- 52 See again Moran (2012) who focuses in her interpretation on the secular fundaments of the ethical community.

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