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Book Reviews

James J. DiCenso, *Kant's Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: A Commentary*.
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Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (*Religion*) has been woefully neglected in Anglophone scholarship. While there is a surfeit of literature on Part One's thesis that the entire human species is innately evil, and a far more modest amount of work on the soteriological claims of Parts Two and Three, hardly any of its other topics have been discussed.

There have, of course, been various anthologies, such as the 1991 *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, the 2006 *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, and what may be best seen as a survey of the literature in Firestone and Jacobs's *In Defense of Kant's Religion*. But the existing treatments bypass far too much. They lack a unified or unifying interpretation of the text, and so rarely offer much help when trying to understand the overall project of *Religion*. Hence, it is time, or rather, far past time, for someone to take on *Religion* as a whole: to give us a comprehensive study of the text, one guided by a philosophically mature and unifying interpretative principle.

With James DiCenso's *Commentary*, we finally have precisely this. It offers the reader a complete, internally cohesive, eminently readable, and philosophically tenable (though I think incorrect) interpretation of the whole of *Religion*. Rather than getting bogged down by the difficulties of Part One or the masses of literature on how our propensity to evil can be both innate and chosen, DiCenso provides a balanced rendering of all of *Religion*'s four parts. He even devotes a (short) chapter to *Religion*'s two prefaces. Throughout, he holds closely to the text itself, offering modest exposition and only rarely venturing beyond more than brief philosophical analyses or reconstructions. Similarly, little time is spent on the secondary literature, generally avoiding the current debates and controversies. What is offered instead is far more of a virgin commentary on the text itself, and as such, one that is well suited to one's first encounter with *Religion*.

More advanced scholars, however, will likely find themselves disappointed. This is in part because DiCenso does not engage with the current debates.

It is also because his overall interpretative strategy leaves most of these debates nugatory. Following Adina Davidovich's 'How to Read Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone' (1993; see also Davidovich 1994), DiCenso turns all religious doctrines into nothing more than heuristics, relevant only to the extent that they might help facilitate our moral endeavours. Accordingly, we need not be concerned with whether or not in Kant's appropriation of the doctrine of original sin, he can reconcile its being innate yet also chosen. Nor do we have to fill in Part One's notorious missing formal proof for the universality of the propensity to evil. Following DiCenso (and Davidovich), original sin and its Kantian corollary are really just metaphors with the 'practical effect of helping us reflect upon and modify our own attitudes and maxims, and to follow through on these efforts in the course of our lives' (p. 73).

Likewise, we do not need to explain how to reconcile sanctifying grace with our remaining responsible for our own moral transformation: 'Once again, Kant is not engaging in theological speculation concerning the doctrine of grace in any form' (p. 117). All such difficulties are resolved – or more aptly, *dissolved* – through DiCenso's core thesis. Religious doctrines, including the highest good and its postulates, are just 'culturally transmitted representational forms' (p. 114). Their sole significance stems from (or ought to stem from) their capacity to 'guide our reflective ethical practices' (p. 114). '[T]hey do not describe objective reality' but rather just help foster 'better people and better societies (more in accordance with universal laws of freedom)' (p. 107).

We need not concern ourselves with *Religion*'s 'Wobbles' (Michalson 1990), 'Failures' (Hare 1996) or 'Conundrums' (Wolterstorff 1991). We can dismiss the need to 'Recover from Kant' (Wolterstorff 1998). For there are no impeding doctrines being advanced in his philosophy of religion. It is all just metaphor. Hence, the criticisms of Kant's philosophical theology we find in Quinn, Wolterstorff, Hare and others, and the defences mounted by Palmquist, Mariña, Muchnik and so on, are one and all misdirected. Properly understood, Kant proffers no doctrines about sin and redemption. We do not need to fill in missing arguments or reconcile conflicting theses. Such concepts may help 'guide our reflective ethical practices' but only as heuristic models, and are not meant to 'describe objective reality'.

As DiCenso tells his readers in the Introduction, 'my explication follows a quite rigorous linear approach' (p. 23) – and his commentary absolutely holds true to this. Once one sees the true project of *Religion*, there is little more that needs to be understood, and so, rather than exploring the complex philosophical problems that fill its pages, DiCenso's appeal to metaphor and heuristics makes short shrift of them all.

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While this interpretation has its merits, and may even well suit those who follow the 'two aspects' or 'methodological' interpretation of Kant (for by DiCenso's reading, there is no need of any positive noumenal metaphysics), I believe that it has failed to sustain an important distinction in *Religion*, and it is this failure that lies behind DiCenso's core interpretative strategy.

I *do* think that he is correct to claim that Kant views the body of symbols, rituals, traditions and texts of historical faith as valuable insofar as they are conducive to our moral efforts. He is also quite correct that one of the key goals of *Religion* is to direct 'us away from literalism and mysticism' (p. 126). Kant repeatedly cautions us against treating the 'intrinsically contingent' (6: 105) aspects of religion as if they were essential to our moral transformation. This is an enduring problem and much of Part Four is devoted precisely to it.

Unfortunately, however, it is not the case that all that falls within religion is 'intrinsically contingent'. The express project of *Religion* is to compare the alleged record of revelation (within the Christian tradition) with the 'Pure Rational System of Religion'. In the Second Preface, Kant describes two circles, one containing the other. The larger of the two is comprised of this record and the doctrines that flow from it. The smaller circle contains the doctrines of pure rational faith. But as either a cause or a consequence of his overly brief chapter on the prefaces, DiCenso, unfortunately, has failed to take this division seriously. Just as his commentary bypasses nearly all the secondary literature debating the philosophical theology found in *Religion*, so likewise it is nearly silent on Kant's conception of faith.

For DiCenso, it seems that 'faith' involves nothing more than a commitment to the moral law (cf. pp. 99, 127). While I agree that this commitment is part of Kant's positive use of the term, it is not all there is to it (Pasternack 2011). The highest good and its postulates, which are the foundational tenets of the pure rational system of religion, are not just symbols of heuristic value to our moral vocation. Rather, each is an object of assent, an assent to their *truth* – and in fact, an assent with *certainty*. These points are made quite explicitly in all three *Critiques* (e.g. A829/B857, 5: 145, 5: 469), in the *Jäsche Logic* (9: 70), lecture notes (e.g. 24: 148, 28: 1082), *Reflexionen* (16: 373, 375) and in many of the shorter works, especially of the 1790s (e.g. 20: 298). Although our grounds for the assent are moral rather than theoretical, Kant repeatedly asserts that we must genuinely believe in them. By contrast, heuristic and regulative principles call for no such commitment.

Of course, his arguments for why we must believe in them change time and again. They range from the first *Critique*'s motivation argument, succeeded by the second *Critique*'s argument that sets the highest good as a

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condition for the authority of the moral law, and then back to a weakened motivation argument in the third *Critique*, one that places the doctrine and its postulates at the margins of our moral lives, functioning as 'motivational supplements' (to borrow a term from Denis 2005) to help us deal with the despair that may arise from 'all the evils of poverty, illness, and untimely death' (5: 452). In my opinion, there is an interesting developmental story to be told regarding the above, one that culminates not with the third *Critique*, but with First Preface to *Religion*. Unfortunately, DiCenso's cursory treatment of *Religion*'s two prefaces does not give due attention to the pivotal role of the highest good, either to the record of Kant's prior arguments, or to the new and compelling argument of the First Preface, or to its connection to the portentous statement that 'Morality thus inevitably leads to religion' (6: 6). In fact, DiCenso's *Commentary* makes no more than seven or eight passing comments about this doctrine, even though it is the ground upon which the whole pure rational system of religion rests.

The consequences of this oversight are profound. Without an account of the role of the highest good, its postulates, and the nature of the assent we are to have in them, *Religion* (or at least Parts Two to Four) will continue to be seen as a garrulous text primarily about the instrumental value of religious symbols. By contrast, if moral faith were given its due importance as a mode of genuine conviction (*Überzeugung*), a point Kant repeatedly makes throughout the corpus, then we do really need to gain cognitive purchase on how the highest good is possible, how the propensity to evil can be both innate and chosen, what we must do to become 'well-pleasing' to God, what role humanity does and does not have in the establishment of the ethical community, and so on. Thus, while DiCenso is correct that historical faith provides many symbols and rituals that are 'intrinsically contingent' (6: 105) and of only instrumental and heuristic value, the same does not hold for the doctrines of pure rational faith. As noted above, the corpus is replete with discussions of the assent proper to these doctrines. They are not to be dismissed as 'arbitrary precepts' but rather demand careful philosophical analysis. Unfortunately, DiCenso has not given due attention to this core distinction. The result is a commentary that ultimately overlooks the philosophical wealth of *Religion*, reading it instead as a work that has little more to teach us than DiCenso's oft repeated thesis that we must avoid any literal reading of religious doctrines and see them instead as merely our moral ideals in 'imaginatively enhanced or pictorial form' (p. 28).

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Manfred Kuehn, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte: Ein deutscher Philosoph 1762–1814. Biographie*.

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Fichte is one of the three most significant transcendental philosophers (the others being Kant and Husserl). Quite an achievement, given that he was largely self-taught as a philosopher, having done very little philosophy at either of the two universities he attended: Jena and Leipzig. But when he had discontinued his studies and was working as a house tutor he discovered Kant and, convinced that he understood Kant better than Kant understood himself, went on to produce the most radical form of idealism in the history of philosophy. In his *Wissenschaftslehre* (doctrine of science) Kant's transcendental unity of apperception is replaced by an absolute ego responsible not just for the form of experience but also for its content. Fichte's absolute ego or *sich selbst setzendes Ich* is not just a necessary condition of knowledge but a necessary and sufficient condition and as such is not just an epistemological principle but also an ontological or metaphysical principle. Assuming an absolute ego, Fichte's transcendentalism might have some plausibility. But it has no plausibility at all if the ego is an individual ego. If the *Tathandlung* which produces the world (the *Nicht-Ich* in its totality)