ARTICLE

Liberal Democracy Needs Religion: Kant on the Ethical Community

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Abstract

Liberal democracy has been experiencing a crisis of representation over the last decade, as a disconnect has emerged from some of the foundational principles of liberalism such as personal freedom and equality. In this article, I argue that in the third part of Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* we can find resources to better understand and counteract this crisis of liberal democracy. Kant gives a powerful argument to include an invisible ethical community under a political community, and this ethical community has to take the form of a church. Kant argues then that any political system, and so also liberal democracy, requires religion to ally citizens in a foundational way with the general principles of that system. This would commit liberal nations to having their foundational principles buoyed by religion. Towards the close of the essay, I attend to how this might impact on liberalism's commitment to religious and ideological pluralism.

Keywords: Kant; ethical community; religion; liberalism; political motivation; church

Liberal democracies seem to be in trouble these days. I think Kant can be of assistance. The general problem I will engage with is that human beings are often disinclined to ally themselves to the principles of liberalism. This is a problem that can find a solution in Kant's discussion of an ethical community in the third part of his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793/94; hereafter, *Religion* or *Rel*).[1] Next to his more overt concern of providing a regulative focus for communal moral improvement, Kant sought – as I will argue throughout this article – a way to ally human beings more robustly with a political system through religion.[2] He does so by prescribing a sense of historical faith – as the visible incarnation of universal religion – that intimately marries individuals to some of the basic tenets of liberal democracy, most importantly the equal freedom of citizens.

1. What is the problem?

Let us very broadly define here a liberal democracy as a political system governed by the principles of classical liberalism, that is, a political system that guarantees equal rights of social, economic and political participation irrelevant of class, gender, ethnicity, belief or wealth; the separation of powers into an executive, legislative and judiciary

branch; the separation of church and state. Within a liberal state, there might be wild disagreements on how to implement these foundational principles properly, and how to govern accordingly, but these principles themselves are not – neither for those on the right, nor for those on the left of the political aisle – open to debate. Usually, this means that these principles are codified in national (a constitution) and international (a declaration of universal rights) fundamental laws. For our current discussion, the most important principle of liberalism is the equal freedom of the members of the state.

Liberal democracy has lost some of its flair in recent decades, as evidenced, for one, by the large-scale protest movements against the neoliberal course taken by Western liberal democracies.[3] More pertinent for current purposes, however, is the surge of ideologies at both extremes of the political spectrum that promote a form of identitarian politics that destabilizes the foundations of liberal politics. I think this is a potent ideological challenge to political liberalism. Identitarian politics works by privileging group identity over personal accomplishments, which tends to move the state into privileging or hurting certain groups with a shared identity (and so it becomes illiberal). This can happen on the right or the left. On the right, there has been the remarkable rise of right-wing populism in the Western world that tends to scapegoat the identitarian 'outsider' for the social and economic difficulties experienced by nations. In this way of thinking, outsiders are not valued on the basis of their personal achievements, but rather on the basis of negative characteristics associated to the group to which they are perceived to belong. On the left, something similar can happen that is less frequently recognized. In extreme forms of left-wing ideology, there can emerge a tendency to scapegoat the identitarian 'insider' for the social and economic difficulties that are experienced by disenfranchised groups. While the explicit focus is on providing true equality to disenfranchised groups, this can occur by politics that disenfranchise individuals who are perceived to belong to the ruling class, even if they have experienced no particular privilege.

These movements privilege group rights and justice over individual rights and justice. If such politics are implemented on a wide scale (even with the best of intentions), they threaten to mitigate or even destroy some of the foundational principles of liberal democracy, such as free participation and free speech. Much of such politics is veiled by rationalizations that attempt to justify group-based policy as directed towards promoting real equality. This point could be developed in further detail, but it is not the central focus of this article.

What is more important, and particularly worrisome from a classical liberal point of view, is that many people seem to accept or even celebrate the erosion of the foundational principle of equal participation in a liberal society. I am not excluding the possibility that there could be good reasons to oppose liberal democracy. I am merely noticing here that such anti-liberal political views are a sign that enthusiasm for the project of liberal democracy has waned.[4] For someone still wedded to its foundational principles, it seems vital to consider ways in which to promote the idea of liberal democracy, and avoid identitarian politics, without infringing on the equal freedom of the citizenry. The following discussion of Kant's ethical community shows that affinity for liberal principles ought to be non-conditional rather than prudential.[5] This would result, for instance, in being personally committed to the outcomes of liberal proceedings, even if one is opposed to the currently elected policy or official. Such affinity can be created by means of soft paternalism or nudging, which could

take the form of citizenship tests for newcomers, citizenship classes in public schools, public campaigns in favour of gender and racial equality, etc.[6] Whether such soft paternalism is ultimately effective is debatable: it is one thing to 'tick a box', it is another to be intimately convinced of the value of certain ideals.[7]

The question I want to address is whether an intimate allegiance to political liberalism can be achieved politically or whether something else must come into play. We can find an interesting answer to that question in the third part of Kant's *Religion*. His argument is that politics cannot function without a properly circumspect historical faith as an ethical community that cultivates affinity for ethics. This means that to sustain the real possibility of achieving the political ends of a liberal democracy (or, in Kant's terms, to ground the political duties of the Doctrine of Right) political community must itself be sustained by a more foundational ethical community. That ethical community serves its own purpose, which is to ground the possibility of the highest good, but it additionally grounds the pursuit of political duties. For it to achieve this end, the ethical community must take the form of a transnational church. Some Kant scholars recognize that a legally good political state is conducive to morally good people.[8] I make the reverse and what I take to be stronger argument (without objecting to the former) that a morally good community is vital for a legally good political state. In this article, I analyse and engage with Kant's argument for the inclusion of an invisible church to sustain a successful political system. Towards the close, I will show some of the tensions in this argument, bearing on liberalism's commitment to pluralism and the separation of church and state.

2. The Antinomy of *Religion* III: politics leads to religion

Kant's ethics and political views are traditionally read from the perspective of *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). From this perspective, most readers assume that Kant draws a strict line between legality and morality: the primary purpose, on the one hand, of a political state is to disincentivize the execution of illegal behaviour and, on the other hand, the primary purpose of morality is to augment and cultivate our pursuit of a moral disposition (*Gesinnung*).[9] If religion is to play a role at all, this seems to take place in ethics only, not politics. This seems to be in line with the general policies of most liberal democracies that prefer to put religion on the sidelines of politics or ban religion altogether from the public sphere. Kant somewhat unexpectedly then puts forward the vital need for religion to cooperate with politics and ethics in *Religion* III. As I will argue, Kant could be read as making the argument that religion must cooperate with liberal democracy. A citizen of a liberal democracy must be committed to liberal principles in the same way that religious believers are committed to their fundamental religious beliefs.[10] Commitment then means to align your own identity with these principles. Kant never made this point overtly, but it can be gathered from a careful reading of *Religion*.

Kant opens that book with his thesis that human nature is radically evil. This means, very generally, that human beings have a freely acquired and ineradicable propensity in their very nature to overturn the proper and moral hierarchy between our sensuous and our moral interests (*Rel*, 6: 29–39). Human beings are of such a kind that they naturally prefer their happiness over their moral duty.[11] If we translate this point to the

sphere of politics – which is not to say that it can be reduced to the social sphere[12] – then this means that human beings are easily tempted in the public sphere to privilege their private ends to the more general ends of the state. An analogy: while most citizens recognize that taxation is good, most citizens equally aim to pay the least amount possible. This is a trait of human nature. Kant discusses the challenges that humanity's evil nature offers to individuals (*Religion* II) and community (*Religion* III). In order to counteract the former, he comes close to a philosophical appreciation of religious grace (6: 44–53) and Christology (6: 57–66). In order to counteract the latter, Kant explicitly states that the moral betterment of individuals will not suffice: even well-disposed moral agents 'will mutually corrupt each other's moral disposition' (*Rel,* 6: 94). The problem of the communal betterment of humanity is a problem that should be tackled on a level between a personal ethics and a broader politics. By itself, an ethical system might incline individuals to moral virtue but it cannot counteract interpersonal corrupting effects; by itself, a political system might achieve a civil or legal peace, but it cannot cultivate the much-needed intrinsic affinity for its own principles. To overcome these difficulties, Kant introduces the notion of an ethical community.

In order to combat the potentially debilitating effects one can have on one's fellow moral agents, Kant argues that we need one thing in particular: 'The setting up and the diffusion of a society in accordance with, and for the sake of, the laws of virtue' (*Rel*, 6: 94). When it is discussed in the literature, there is a tendency to consider the ethical community in merely socio-political rather than religious terms. Andrews Reath in his famous 'Two Conceptions of the Highest Good' argues in favour of a secular rather than a theological conception of Kant's notion of the highest good (Reath 1988). More recently, Christopher Insole made the point that 'in the [political] state of the highest created good [or ethical community], we are not centrally referred or oriented to the transcendence of God' (Insole 2016: 24).[13] A secularized reading of Kant's philosophy of religion has its merits, but such a reading risks missing Kant's important argument that politics and ethics require the assistance of religion in order to make good on their ends, namely, legal peace and moral betterment respectively.

Let us then here review Kant's argument for the ethical community as a religious community. Kant mirrors the transition from an ethical state of nature towards an ethical community in the transition from a political state of nature towards a political community. In his *Rechtslehre*, he argues that human beings are propelled into a political community so as to regulate the distribution of property (*MM*, 6: 258ff.). The transition from an individual to a communitarian ethical state, which is an 'association (*Gesellschaft*) of human beings merely under the laws of virtue' (*Rel*, 6: 94), is required also to regulate human behaviour, but now on the level of morality. The immediate problem with Kant's argument is that moral agency is based upon autonomous self-determination through universal, rational principles, and this cannot be regulated through coercive laws. This puts him in a bind, and the matter is best phrased in the form of an antinomy:

Thesis: Human beings require an ethical community to regulate moral behaviour.

Antithesis: Human beings cannot construct an ethical community by their own means.

The thesis should be clear from the above: human beings are prone to corrupting one another morally and therefore there is a need for a society that promotes ethical virtue. These inter-individual corrupting effects not only impact others, but also the individual. The lack of a just ethical community might, namely, impede an individual's resolve to act virtuously. More importantly, however, these corrupting effects influence the social structure of a society, by which Kant points out that society as a whole, or indeed mankind as a whole, will lack the means to progress morally without an ethical community. This is why he calls the establishment of an ethical community a duty 'of the human race to itself' (*Rel*, 6: 97). This means that all individual human beings are morally obligated to enter an ethical community so as to promote the moral progress of humanity, even if they themselves believe that they can fare perfectly well without such a community.

An ethical community morally benefits individuals and humanity as a whole, and therefore it becomes a general duty for humanity to be united in an ethical community. However, as the antithesis above claims, human beings cannot erect or even regulate such an ethical community. There are two reasons for this, which relate to humanity's finitude. First, any community that is manmade will have external laws that are enforced through coercion. However, an ethical community must be constructed upon internal, rational principles that are endorsed autonomously.[14] Any political project that is geared towards the moral betterment of the people will have adverse effects: 'Woe to the legislator who would want to bring about through coercion a polity directed to ethical ends! For he would thereby not only achieve the very opposite of ethical ends, but also undermine his political ends and render them insecure' (6: 96). At best, public legislation can encourage the outward execution of productive behaviour, but it is likely to adversely affect the moral disposition of the individual if it aims for moral betterment. The individual might come to believe that his compliance with the moral law is conditional upon the reward or punishment that is associated with public legislation. Adherence to moral rules should be unconditional. This is not to exclude that a well-structured political state might indirectly facilitate moral agency. The second concern is that, in order to regulate an ethical community, one is in need of some sort of adjudicator who is capable of scrutinizing the morality of its members' agency. Since morality is based upon invisible incentives, no human legislator is capable of doing so. However one may investigate the behaviour and mindset of another individual, one can never tell without a shadow of a doubt whether they were moved by moral or non-moral concerns. Kant emphasizes that such knowledge is not even available regarding our own motivation (see esp. *MM*, 6: 447; *Rel*, 6: 51, 63).

Readers familiar with Kant's antinomy of practical reason in the second *Critique* (*CPrR*, 5: 110–14) will find the above antinomy familiar. The respective theses and antitheses are very similar. That antinomy can be summarized as follows:

Thesis: Reason demands that morality is consummated with apportioned happiness.

Antithesis: Experience teaches us that morality is not consummated with apportioned happiness, and human beings cannot, by themselves, bring about this highest good.

In both antinomies, there is a reasonable and moral demand that is impinged by the conditions of sensibility. One could be tempted then to believe that both antinomies offer a different solution to a similar problem. I think it is paramount to show how they have different ends in mind. The dominant view of the relationship between these antinomies is that they are concerned with securing the possibility of the two senses of the highest good (perfect virtue and the consummation of happiness and virtue).[15] This is obvious for the antinomy of practical reason, which Kant famously resolves by postulating the immortality of the soul and the existence of God so as to allow for respectively infinite progress towards conforming one's will to the moral law and the proportioned consummation of merit (virtue) with reward (happiness). According then to the dominant reading, Kant's ethical community is a non-theological version of the postulation of the existence of God where the transcendent dimension of the second *Critique* is traded in for a more immanent ethical community in *Religion* and *On Perpetual Peace*.

Kant is not primarily concerned – *pace* this reading – with the consummation of the highest good when discussing the ethical community in *Religion* III. The ethical community is often mistakenly identified with 'the kingdom of ends' in Kant's philosophy. Kant is very explicit that the ethical community is itself not the 'Kingdom of God . . . but what preparations must [be made] in order [for this to come about]" (*Rel*, 6: 101). In other words, his main concern in *Religion* III is to lay a ground for a sort of special community that encourages moral cooperation and harmony between different individuals so as to put humanity in the best possible position for the Kingdom of God/ ends to come. This means that Kant aims with the ethical community neither at perfect virtue nor at the proportionate consummation of virtue with happiness. Human beings have a duty to establish an ethical community, not the kingdom of God. This point is apparent even in the second *Critique*. There, Kant emphasizes that humanity's duty is to promote (*befördern*) the highest good, which means that they ought to put themselves in the very best possibility so that this may come about. Lewis White Beck was right when he made the point that it is not the job of 'a laborer in the vineyard to apportion happiness to the virtuous' (Beck 1960: 245). In the second *Critique*, Kant writes that 'the promotion (*Beförderung*) of the highest good . . . is an a priori necessary object of our will and inseparably bound up with the moral law" (*CPrR*, 5: 114). Kant's term *Beförderung* has occasionally been read as pursuit, which misses the point.[16] He means that we are to create the circumstances in which the highest good can come about, not pursue the highest good directly.[17]

3. The foundation of an ethico-religious community

The antinomy in *Religion* III bears out that humanity both needs an ethical community and cannot establish such a community by itself. This ethical community assists and enables moral behaviour. Since whatever is necessary is equally possible (*ultra posse nemo obligatur*), the grounds of possibility of an ethical community are a legitimate

aspect of practical faith. This means that we are warranted in postulating whatever is the ground and adjudicator of an ethical community.

Kant does not mince words when he simply states that an ethical community requires 'the concept of God as a moral ruler of the world' and so 'an ethical community is conceivable only as a people under divine commands, i.e. as a people of God' (*Rel*, 6: 99). This is the case because we need a legislator whose commands are moral duties and who can function as an adjudicator who is capable of scrutinizing the heart:

> All *true duties*, hence also the ethical, must be represented as *at the same time* his commands; consequently, he must also be one who knows the heart, in order to penetrate to the most intimate parts of the dispositions of each and everyone and, as must be in every community, give to each according to the worth of his actions. (*Rel*, 6: 99)

The postulation of God as legislator and adjudicator cannot invite human beings to a sort of moral passivity or even laziness. If human beings cannot bring about an ethical community and if they cannot judge the morality of others, this might lead towards a sort of defeatism or at least passivism. Human beings could just hope that God will sort things out in the end. However, Kant argues that such a passivity in awaiting grace is not the right attitude.[18] Despite being in need of some assistance, Kant argues that 'each [individual] must so conduct himself as if everything depended on him' (*Rel*, 6: 101). This point is repeated in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, where Kant states that all human agency must be represented as 'issuing from the human being's own use of his moral powers' (*CF*, 7: 42) and that grace is to be read as the 'hope that the good will develop in us' (7: 43). If human beings adopt an idea of justifying grace, according to this text, it must be in order to supplement their own limitations after having exhausted their own capacities.

Reading the ethical community in terms of such cooperative grace – as a supplement to the limitations of human agency – does not exhort individuals to moral passivity but, to the contrary, forces them to pursue morality to the utmost of their capacities. This might invite a secularizing (or even instrumentalizing) reading of Kant's ethical communitarianism. For it might seem as if Kant is arguing only that if human beings would despair of their moral capacities when considering their inability to erect and regulate an ethical community, then they are rationally allowed to postulate the existence of God. The postulation of God would then be dependent upon a potential need that arises from recognizing human limitations – not on actual belief in God. What if human beings, despite their limitations, could instead work cheerfully towards progressing morally without the looming shadow of despair that the highest good might never be attained? However, it seems to me that some of the more potent force of Kant's argument, that is, that political communities need an ethical community that is religious in nature, must lie beyond this point.

4. The politics of religious commitment

The general reading of Kant's argument for an ethical community, as discussed in the preceding section, is that the ethical community allows for an end for moral agency in the same way that God provides that end as a resolution to the antinomy of practical

reason. This is not wrong, only incomplete. I will here add another reading of Kant's ethical community as buoying the conditions for the highest good to come about. On my reading, the ethical community is a community that creates affinity for the moral law and does not primarily seek to secure the apportioning of virtue with happiness.[19] It is for that reason, as I will discuss in the next section, that Kant's argument for the inclusion of religion in liberal politics is a possible counterweight to some of the contemporary troubles of liberal politics.

Kant establishes that an ethical community should take the form of a religious community or a church. Many Kant scholars lament his use of religious language and believe that Kant would have been better off describing the ethical community in more secular terms. I think Laura Papish makes a good point in explaining Kant's language:

> In Kant's eyes, a secular ethical community will likely not anchor us firmly enough in those doctrines and symbolic parables that need to be in place in order for a person to have a common set of terms and insights with others. For at least this reason ... churches remain his preferred model for ethical communities. (Papish 2018: 225)

In Papish's view, religion is one potential tool to 'anchor' human beings in a social community (Papish 2018: 220–7). While I am for the most part in agreement with Papish's point, I would put forward the stronger claim that *only* religion can achieve the end that Kant has in mind.

Kant turns to the topic of a church when he asks what 'preparations' must be made for 'the kingdom of God [to] come' (*Rel*, 6: 101). The visible church is the temporary institution on earth that prepares for the kingdom of God, a kingdom wherein morality and virtue are aligned. This is the sort of eschatology usually associated with early Christian communities: the church is a temporary institution necessary for the time during which believers await the second coming of Christ. To clarify this further, Kant differentiates between the church invisible and the church visible: the former is 'the mere idea of the union of all upright human beings under direct yet moral divine world-governance' and the latter is 'the actual union of human beings into a whole that accords with this ideal' (*Rel*, 6: 101). In other words, the visible church is the actual instantiation of the ideal invisible church and it falls to human beings to make the visible church accord with the invisible one. To this purpose, Kant proposes four regulative ideals that are the necessary conditions for a true visible church.

The status of these principles is paramount to understanding Kant's point. These principles are the underlying features of an ethical community. They are, in other words, not codified in a foundational text, but they are the very structuring elements of that community. In a visible church, these principles do not need to be put into text (although this could be helpful) and they may be accompanied by more particular features (as long as they do not conflict with these most foundational principles). I will focus on the first and third principles of a true church, namely, its universality and the freedom of its members, because these two principles return in a liberal democracy.

The first principle is 'universality'. This means that the foundational principles of the church are so constituted that they 'necessarily lead it to universal union in a

single church (hence, no sectarian schisms)' (*Rel*, 6: 101). Any community that includes besides a principle of inclusion also one of exclusion is not a universal community. Since the purpose of the ethical community is to unite human beings into cooperation, it stands to reason that this community cannot include principles that could hamper or even counteract such universal cooperation. This means that, while an ethical community can be anchored nationally or regionally, its focus must be international, even universal.

The third principle is 'freedom'. Freedom is approached from two perspectives by Kant, namely, as 'the internal relation of its members among themselves' and in 'the external relation of the church to the political power' (*Rel*, 6: 102). This means two things. First, the ethical community, or 'church', must retain its independence from political power. Political states tend to work by principles of exclusion, which can undercut the moral fabric of the ethical community if it becomes a nationally oriented church. A church should be an international agent within a national state. Second, the church must be constituted so that no one can be forced into joining that church. This would make their allegiance to the church disingenuous and is counter to morality. Yet, every individual has a moral duty to join a universal community so as to incarnate the moral law.

I admit, it is difficult to imagine what sort of community this would be. It is easier to say what sort of community it is not. First, it cannot be a political community, even not an international or transnational one, since such communities are ultimately dependent upon external and coercive laws. Second, the community cannot be a civil, free-to-join community (such as a social club) either, since human beings are under a moral duty to enter an ethical community. The community must then be something between a coercive and a free-to-join community, one wherein the individual intimately recognizes a sense of belonging that is not enforced by external laws. Kant himself believes that the best analogy for such a community is not a monarchy, aristocracy or democracy, but 'a household (a family) under a common though invisible moral father' (*Rel*, 6: 102). It is apparent that Kant makes use of Christian imagery here, and the images are important. Kant is not thinking of a generic household, but an ideal household with, ironically, an absentee father. There is no visible authority, but everyone works cooperatively to achieve the father's will. We will return to this point below in our discussion of priestcraft.

The invisible church cannot stay invisible. The ethical community requires the cooperation of the human and the divine. While the founding of the ethical community is, as we have shown, to be attributed to God, human beings are to be seen as if they were 'the authors of the *organization*' (*Rel*, 6: 152). Practically, this means that ethical community must somehow become visible and externalized. Kant emphasizes the importance of this step: 'It is already a beginning of the dominion of the good principle and a sign "that the Kingdom of God is at hand", even if only the principles of its constitution begin to become *public*' (6: 151). This is peculiar. Kant had already emphasized that those elements that are historically connected to religion, such as its rites, tradition and particular dogmas, are ultimately morally irrelevant and can even become a distraction. Yet, Kant does emphasize that religion must become visible. The reason for this is that historical faith is the vehicle for universal religion. Without a church that incarnates, or attempts to incarnate, the universal message of religion, there is no visible anchor for that message. The universal religion might be the

essence of religion (*ratio essendi*), the historical faith is the way human beings come to know the universal religion, even if imperfectly (*ratio cognoscendi*).

The visible church must be well-attuned to the invisible church. This means that the ideas, rituals and narratives of a certain historical faith are so constituted and developed that they ultimately support the cultivation of a good *Gesinnung*. For instance, a historical religion might have a sort of rite of initiation within a community, such as baptism, which is then thought of as not in itself a tool for moral justification, but as the recognition of the individual as an end in itself who freely and equally participates in social life. The inspirational force of religious practices can augment an individual's commitment to the principles of morality. This can only happen, according to Kant, in an ethical community that manifests itself visibly and historically.

Kant expresses a dubious hope that after the pure religion of reason has made itself public in a historical faith, it can progress in such a way that it would be able to dispense with its historical clothing. A church is a true, moral church if 'it contains within itself a principle of constantly coming closer to the pure faith of religion (which, when operative, is what truly constitutes religion in every faith) and of eventually being able to dispense with ecclesiastical faith' (*Rel*, 6: 153). Kant's own hesitations in this respect are borne out by the footnote he appended to a footnote in the third part of *Religion* (6: 135n.). In the main text, Kant discusses the providential idea of the Kingdom of God on earth where the moral principle is triumphant over its enemies. This Kingdom of God tends to be represented symbolically as bringing 'heaven' to 'earth' (or: heaven on earth), 'the very form of a church is dissolved; the vicar on earth enters the same class as the human beings who are now elevated to him as citizens of Heaven, and so God is all in all' (6: 135). This image is to be read, as the first footnote clarifies, as indicating that those elements of a historical faith (holy books, rituals, traditions, prophecy) that are not purely rational or moral (which might have been necessary to establish, preserve and spread a faith) must come to an end. It is the duty of the moral educator of society to 'diligently work for this [that historical faith goes over into religious faith], through the continuous development of the pure religion of reason out of its present still indispensable shell' (6: 135n.). However, Kant appends a footnote to this footnote, clarifying that he means that the visible church will not actually disappear. It only has to be of such a nature that it 'can' (6: 135n.).

When an ethical community makes itself public, it can work so as to undergird the political community. It can then not only provide the moral resolve for the political community and its coercive legislation, but it creates a sphere of moral purposiveness that allies members of that political community to moral principles. The ethical community, which Kant consistently calls a church, is the bedrock that ensures that members of a liberal democratic state are wedded to that state not merely on conditional grounds. Instead, their allegiance to liberal democracy is woven into the very values that they have come to identify as their bedrock principles.

5. Committing religiously to liberal politics

The ethical community provides certain tools that stimulate one's commitment to moral duties. The ethical community (or church) is basically concerned with the

moral education of the people, not so much to teach what duties are to be taken up, but to cultivate a frame of thought wherein one pursues these duties with 'a frame of mind that is both *valiant* and *cheerful*' (*MM, 6: 484*). This section will investigate how such religious commitment provides an antidote to partisan, populist and identitarian movements within liberal democracies.

Kant repeatedly stresses that religious faith ought to be universal. Moral duties bind each reasonable individual regardless of class, gender or race. A historical faith, subsequently, cultivates the idea of thorough equality, even for those who are not believers in that particular faith. In other words, there is no room for a sense of election in Kant's view of religion. When a historical faith cultivates a sense of the unique historical significance of a certain people, they in some form or other make the claim that this people is specially favoured by God. The very idea of 'election' makes it necessary to ascribe certain characteristics to God, such as favouritism, that do not cohere with the rational idea of God as a perfect moral judge. Moral religion secures the moral equality of all human beings.

Ascribing erroneous characteristics to God and therefore diminishing the moral character of a historical faith is based upon what Kant calls the universal subjective ground of religious delusion, namely, anthropomorphism (*Rel*, 6: 168). This is the belief that God could be pleased, and so also that one could be a good faithful individual, by means that are non- or even amoral. However, as Kant does not tire from emphasizing, 'a*part from good life-conduct, anything which the human being supposes that he can do to become well-pleasing to God is mere religious delusion and counterfeit service of God*' (6: 170–1; Kant's emphasis). For our current purposes, this means that the religious principles underlying a liberal democratic state do not bestow a special rank (higher or lower) upon any individual or group except through their moral merit. The moral religion then cultivates a sense of communal struggle for moral betterment that is neither tribal nor partisan.

The moral religion, therefore, serves as counterweight to the all-too-human temptation to be taken in by traits that are ultimately irrelevant for liberal democracy. The moral religion does so by gearing its own practices to support and justify a strong sense of egalitarianism and personal freedom. With regard to personal freedom, Kant believes that a specific form of priestcraft (*Pfaffentum*) is an immoral form of religiosity, when it includes 'fetish-service' to God (*Rel*, 6: 179). Here, obedience to particular, venerated individuals leads one to believe that certain particular and *ad hoc* practices are a means towards moral justification (for instance, indulgences). Moral religion is counter to the fetish-service of priestcraft because it emphasizes that nothing is above the foundational principles of morality. There is no allowance for the free self-cultivation of individuals to be limited in their pursuit of moral excellence. There is no intermediary between the human being and the moral law and so the principle disincentivizes limitations of personal freedom. Equally, the principle has consequences for one's relation to 'others'. One may not require anything of an 'other', whether an individual or a group, that one does not ask from oneself. No individual or group of individuals has any special rights to claim *or* duties to fulfil towards a liberal democracy. Everyone is ultimately equal. The opposition to priestcraft cultivates a strong sense of personal freedom in moral and political life.

Taken together, these two norms of universality and freedom constitute a fairly sound ideological backdrop for liberal democracies. They cultivate a universal sense

of moral cooperation that does not allow for partisanship or special rights. Through entertaining such foundational principles, liberal democracy can evade the traps of identitarian politics. In one way or another, any form of identitarian politics (leftist or right-wing) judges the worth of specific individuals not on the basis of their achievements, but on the basis of their particular identity. This can happen only if universality and freedom are not seen as the bedrock principles of that society, if the appeal of these liberal democratic principles has been overtaken by other concerns. The solution then is not necessarily to augment the way people generally value these principles (conditional obedience), but to create an ideological basis for their absoluteness (unconditional obedience).

6. Liberal democracy and pluralism

In his *Pluralism in the Ethical Community*, Nicholas Tampio points out that Kant wrote the *Religion* in the context of the Thirty Years' War (though it happened some 150 years earlier) and hoped to conceive of a view of an ethical community that could allow for a sense of pluralism that avoids such conflicts. What is true is that Kant wrote *Religion* while having in mind the 'religious struggles which have so often shaken the world and spattered it with blood' (*Rel*, 6: 108). Tampio goes on to argue that, according to Kant, some religious groups could, or could not, be part of this community (Tampio 2014: 175–92).

This raises an important question. If my argument is that liberal democracy would do well to take Kant's argument seriously, that liberalism generally needs a religion to function, what would this mean with regard to liberalism's commitment to ideological pluralism and the separation of church and state? In its Rawlsian form, contemporary political liberalism is thought of as a theory of justice rather than a theory of ethics. This means that liberalism itself does not subscribe to any particular comprehensive doctrine of 'the good life' (religious or otherwise), but merely provides a framework that regulates the diversity of comprehensive doctrines (Rawls 1971). In order to achieve this end, it is vital that the liberal state remain neutral on such matters, and therefore separate almost all matters of state from matters of comprehensive ideologies.

Rawls was adamant that his understanding of 'justice as fairness' is Kantian. He thus believes that Kant held a merely procedural approach to ethics. However, my argument that Kant gives us good reasons for the inclusion of an ethical community as a church within the framework of political liberalism seemingly infringes upon this requirement of neutrality of the state. There are two distinct ways to respond to this objection. The first response looks closely at what Kant designates as religion. He states that 'there is only *one* (true) *religion*; but there can be several kinds of *faith*' (*Rel*, 6: 107–8). This means that Kant's notion of religion is in itself pluralistic, as it can accommodate many different kinds of religious faith, even a diversity of comprehensive doctrines. For Kant, 'religion' is then a sort of universal, rational essence of any and all true faith; or religion is whatever is the common denominator of all true faith. That common denominator appears devoid of historical content, but suggests among other things that a true faith aims for a universal community of moral cooperation. Such a basic framework can be expressed through the historical

contingencies of Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism (though Kant clearly holds that Christianity, and only Christianity, is the best possible vehicle for moral faith).

That is the first way to respond: to underwrite political liberalism with a sense of religion that does not work to the benefit of any particular faith. It does exclude, however, those particular faiths that do not partake of the essence of a moral religion, such as faiths that preach exclusivism, intolerance and inequality. Kant would not tolerate intolerance. As such, Kant's argument in favour of the ethical community would indeed draw close to the Rawlsian theory of justice that regulates religious diversity.

This leads towards the second way of responding to the above objection. A question that is often raised with regard to political liberalism is whether it amounts itself to a comprehensive doctrine. Instead of merely regulating diversity, political liberalism would itself propose a view of 'the good life'.[20] This would mean that political liberalism itself infringes upon its basic requirement of the neutrality of the state. There is then more 'content' to liberalism than is assumed by Rawlsian philosophy – the veil of ignorance is not as blind as is believed. I think this second response is actually borne out by Kant's discussion of the relationship of religion to politics. Even liberal politics needs some sort of religious sanction, even liberalism requires our unconditional commitment to the values of equality and freedom. To use Oscar Wilde's famous phrase, 'everything to be true must become a religion' (Wilde 1954: 154). Even if this is the case, liberalism does, more than most other comprehensive doctrines, remain a relatively low-content comprehensive doctrine with a viable chance for regulating diversity.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that Kant's inclusion of an ethical community between individual ethics and the political sphere was geared towards creating an ideological basis for the principle of liberal ethics. While most readings of *Religion* III are focused on how Kant seems to be concerned with providing an end to moral agency (through the apportioning of virtue and happiness), I have argued that he had another concern: to erect an ethical society that streamlines the ideological, ethical disposition of its members. This ethical society is thought of in terms of a church that buoys a religion of freedom, equality and inclusivism.

It is arguable that Kant recognizes Christian faith as a good candidate to serve as the ideological basis for liberal society, provided that Christianity is subjected to some critique and reform. He recommended his *Religion* as instruction for biblical scholars who would then supposedly further develop his views and thereby impact the way Christianity impacts society (*Rel*, 6: 10). Christianity must work so as to assuage or even avoid the dangers of populism and identitarian politics that inhere in democracy. To uphold the uplifting principle of equal freedom in liberal democracy, there is a need for something more than mere democracy. Whether Western society is hospitable to this 'something more' must here remain an open question.

Notes

1 References to Kant's text follow the pagination of the *Akademie Ausgabe*. All translations are taken from the Cambridge edition of Kant's works: Kant (1996a, 1996b).

2 Kant studies initially tended to read Kant's engagement with religion as reducible to his concerns with ethics. Many accounts of his philosophy of religion therefore lacked a discussion of the social aspect of religious communities. A recent example of this trend is the work of John Silber (2012). Stephen Palmquist has been very outspoken in arguing for the inclusion of a social dimension of religious faith in Kant's ethics and philosophy of religion: 'Kant clearly does argue *from* the duty of an ethical community *to* the necessity of the church as a *religious* community' (Palmquist 2009: 9). When this social dimension is taken into account, however, there is a prevailing tendency to disregard or downplay its religious dimension. This happens, among others, in the following works (which I will engage in the core of this article): Moran (2012), Papish (2018), Sweet (2013).

3 The loss of confidence in traditional centrist parties (leftist and right-wing) and the rise of extremist parties are the most obvious signs of a general loss of faith in the traditional process of liberal democracy. Most scholars argue that this relates to the 'depoliticization' of liberal democracy, that is, the process wherein policy choices and decisions are moved from the public to the private sphere (e.g. the privatization of health services, public transportation, etc.). See especially the work of Ernesto Laclau (2014) and Chantal Mouffe (2013). For a contemporary review of the situation, see Alen Toplišek (2019).

4 For more detail on decline in support for liberal principles, see Wike and Fetterolf (2018).

5 In the first supplement to *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Kant does raise the issue that prudential and even immoral incentives can be conducive to the initial moment of forming a society: '[R]eason can use the mechanism of nature, through self-seeking inclinations that naturally counteract one another externally as well, as a means to make room for its own end, the rule of right, and in so doing also to promote and secure peace within as well as without, so far as a state itself can do so' (8: 366–7). This is but a moment, however, in the development of politics that must ultimately be superseded by a morally superior state constitution.

6 For discussion of these policies and their relevance for liberal democracies, see Sunstein (2014).

7 The most recent quantitative study on the policy of nudging bears this out. Only under certain specific circumstances is nudging seen to have wide-ranging and lasting positive effects. For a recent review of the research on nudging, see Hummel and Maedche (2019).

8 Most recently, a good case for this point was made by Étienne Brown, according to whom 'political institutions secure the conditions necessary for the pursuit of moral improvement and happiness' (Brown 2020: 214).

9 For a seminal defence of the strict separation of ethics and legality, see Wood (1999). Others have argued that the final end of Kant's political philosophy is the ethical community and therefore there is more continuity between Kant's politics and ethics. See especially Williams (1983: 265–8) and Taylor (2010).

10 One recent advocate of this point is Simon Critchley in his *Faith of the Faithless*. There, he argues that 'the *political* question . . . is how such a faith of the faithless might be able to bind together a confraternity, a consorority or, to use Rousseau's key term, an *association*. If political life is to arrest a slide into demotivated cynicism, then it would seem to require a motivating and authorizing faith which, while not reducible to a specific context, might be capable of forming solidarity in a locality, a site, a region' (Critchley 2012: 4). For further discussion of the interaction between liberal politics and religion, see Vanden Auweele (2020).

11 I cannot develop this aspect of Kant's philosophy in detail here. For full discussion: Muchnik (2009), Anderson-Gold and Muchnik (2010), Michalson (1990), Vanden Auweele (2019).

12 Some readers of Kant have reduced his discussion of radical evil to the social sphere, often because of the apparent lack of an *a priori* proof for a propensity to radical evil in human nature. See Schulte (1988: 78–88), Louden (2010: 93–115), Wood (1999: 283–91).

13 Other examples of this strategy include: Rossi (2005), Moore (1992), DiCenso (2012: 131–50).

14 In Kant's words: 'For in such a community all the laws are exclusively designed to promote the morality of actions (which is something internal, and hence cannot be subject to public human laws) whereas these public laws (and in this they constitute a juridical community) are on the contrary directed to the legality of actions, which is visible to the eye, and not to (inner) morality which alone is at issue here' (*Rel*, 6: 98).

15 Robert S. Taylor e.g. argues that Kant's ethical community (which he discusses mostly from the perspective of *Toward Perpetual Peace*) morphs the transcendent ideal of the second *Critique* into an immanent ideal. This means that Kant's ethical community is a non-theological version of the postulation of the

existence of God. Taylor argues that Kant thereby dismisses the transcendent dimension of the highest good since the ethical community is an immanent ideal where human beings accord their will to the moral law and are dealt happiness in proportion to their merit. At most, on an individual level, human beings can benefit from the postulation of the existence of God by being given the hope for their individual proportionate consummation of happiness with virtue (Taylor 2010). A similar point is made by Kate Moran, who sees a genuine argument for the existence of God in these pages: 'Kant now urges us to believe in God *for the sake of the species*, because as rational beings we realize that the destiny of our species, insofar as we are to fulfill what is implied by our rational nature, *requires* something we must humbly acknowledge we are profoundly unable to accomplish on our own' (Moran 2012: 16). In her view, this argument brings about a more 'immanent, communal account of the highest good' (Moran 2012: 83).

16 For some recent examples of this oversight: Fugate (2014), Joiner (2017).

17 For similar points to my own: Silber (2012: 184–92), Pasternack (2012: 42ff.).

18 This was signalled by Stephen Palmquist as saying that Kant's concept of grace is geared specifically to counter rather than facilitate moral laziness (2010). The nature and function of Kant's account of grace remains a matter of some controversy. For an overview and my own position: Vanden Auweele (2014).

19 This point had been made previously – as an anonymous reviewer of this article pointed out to me – by Lawrence Pasternack (2017). At the time of conceiving of and writing this article, I was unaware of Pasternack's important article. I find myself agreeing with his point of view and believe the present article furthers his work by showing the political consequences of this reading of the highest good.

20 Nicholas Wolterstorff makes this point with regard to liberalism's relationship to religion in Wolterstorff and Audi (1997). Will Kymlicka makes a similar point with respect to minorities in Kymlicka (1989).

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